

World Bank lending \$1 billion to clean Ganga

India's relaunched programme to clean its sacred river Ganga will get \$1 billion from the World Bank, Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh and Bank President Robert B. Zoellick announced here Wednesday.

'The Ganga has sustained civilisation throughout time, but is today burdened by expanding production, industries and urban development along its banks and in its basin, with all the pollution this brings,' said Zoellick, after attending a meeting of the Ganga cleaning programme.

'This is a project of enormous national importance and I am pleased that the World Bank has come forward to assist us,' said Ramesh.

The Ganga basin supports around 400 million people, about a third of India's 1.2 billion population.

The World Bank funding will come over the next 4-5 years. In its initial phase, Bank assistance will focus on three areas -- building the institutions and knowledge base for Ganga basin management, helping build a global consortium of financiers, and financing priority investments.

The new National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA) will set up a knowledge centre that can manage the basin in a sustainable manner. The government has estimated that it will require an initial investment of \$4 billion to achieve its immediate objective of stopping all discharge of untreated sewage and industrial effluent into the Ganga by 2020.

It will also seek to finance select investments aimed at cleaning the 2,500 km long Ganga, where pollution levels in certain stretches touches 10,000 times India's bathing standards. This initial portfolio of projects will be finalised by NGRBA by March 2010.

Wednesday's meeting was attended by officials of the NGRBA, environment ministry, and senior officials from the five Ganga basin states -- Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal.

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