

Kerala demands new dam at Mullaperiyar

As the rising waters in the 111-year-old Mullaperiyar dam in Idukki district threaten to spill over and swamp nearby villages, an all-party meeting on the issue Monday demanded construction of a new dam.

Kerala Chief Minister V.S. Achuthanandan, speaking to reporters after the meeting, said the general consensus was for a new dam.

'It was also decided that there should be some arrangement to drain out the rising waters at Mullaperiyar. Presently there is no sluice to drain out the rising water. We are hoping that the Dec 29 meeting in Delhi when the chief ministers of both Tamil Nadu and Kerala meet would evolve a consensus,' said Achuthanandan.

The present water level in the dam is 138.50 feet - a new high in recent times.

The rising waters of the dam, situated 240 km from here on the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border, prompted the local administration last week to alert villagers living on the banks of the Periyar river to move elsewhere.

The administration would have to divert water through the spillway into the Idukki reservoir if the water level rises further. Meanwhile, Kerala officials Monday removed a new water scale placed in the dam by Tamil Nadu officials on Sunday.

Kerala and Tamil Nadu are at loggerheads over the dam built under an agreement signed in 1886 between the then Maharaja of Travancore and the British administration. It granted the then Madras Presidency the right to construct and maintain the dam and divert the water to irrigate arid lands in Madurai region.

Thus, while the dam is located in Kerala, it serves Tamil Nadu. In recent years, Tamil Nadu has demanded that the storage capacity of the dam be raised to meet the increasing demand of water for irrigation from 136 feet to 142 feet.

Kerala, however, says it would not be safe to do so as the structure was more than a century old.

After Tamil Nadu secured a Supreme Court order this year permitting the water level to be raised from 136 feet to 142 feet, the Kerala government responded with an amendment to a bill passed earlier saying the water level must not be raised under any circumstance.

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