

ISRO agrees to land offered by Kerala

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has agreed to build its proposed space education centre on the new piece of land the Kerala government has offered for free after a controversy over the plot of land the space agency had bought.

Isro chairman G. Madhavan Nair said in a letter to Chief Minister V.S. Achuthanandan - which reached his office Friday - that the agency had no problems with the 100-acre of land near Ponmudi hills offered to it.

ISRO had purchased 82 acres of land at the Ponmudi hills, 70 km from here, from Savy Mano Mathew, a high-profile businessman, in March. The opposition parties in the state have alleged that the land belongs to the state government's forest department and Mathew sold it illegally in connivance with Forest Minister Binoy Viswom.

Following their protest, the government last month cancelled the deal and offered an alternative site to ISRO.

The controversy, however, could continue.

Senior forest official N. Balakrishnan Pillai earlier this week informed the state government that the new land offered to the ISRO also belongs to the forest department.

As soon as the official presented his report to the state, he was given marching orders and Viswom ordered a high-level inquiry into the circumstances that led to Pillai filing the report.

Brushing aside the report, Law Minister M. Vijayakumar told reporters here Saturday that the plot of land belonged to the revenue department.

'There is no problem with the title of the new land that we have offered to the ISRO. If the ISRO has any doubt, the state government will clear it. All the necessary infrastructure would be created by the government and handed over to ISRO,' said the minister.

The Kerala High Court has been hearing a clutch of petitions demanding a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into the first land deal. If more petitions come up now on the basis of Pillai's report, the ambitious space education institute could be further delayed.

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