

Ram Setu affidavit to wait for PM's nod

An affidavit on the controversial Sethusamundram Shipping Channel Project (SSCP) to be filed by the government in the Supreme Court will have to wait till Prime Minister Manmohan Singh returns from his China visit Jan 16 and vets it.

The affidavit is unlikely to be filed on the next hearing date, Jan 16, though its draft on the basis of an expert panel's report is ready, official sources said.

'This is to doubly ensure that this time there are no follies and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself vets the final draft before it is submitted in the apex court. He will return from his China trip only on Jan 16,' an official told IANS on condition of anonymity.

The multi-million dollar Sethusamudram project in the sea dividing India and Sri Lanka will make the sea route shorter for ships travelling between the east and west coasts of India.

The project has been opposed by many groups as well as the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as it requires breaking a portion of Ram Setu or Adam's Bridge, which has a religious significance for Hindus.

Ram Setu is a chain of limestone shoals forming a link between Sri Lanka and India. It finds mention in the epic Ramayana, which says that Lord Ram and his army of monkeys built the bridge to rescue Sita, who was abducted by demon king Ravana.

Janata Party president Subramaniam Swamy has filed a public interest petition in the apex court seeking to stop the construction of this project.

On the other hand, the DMK, the ruling party in Tamil Nadu and an important constituent of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in New Delhi, is keen to implement this project quickly.

The project was approved by the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in 2002 when the DMK was part of it.

Responding to Swamy's lawsuit, the government last year submitted two affidavits, one by the shipping ministry saying Ram Setu was a natural formation and the other by the culture and tourism ministry on behalf of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), questioning the historical existence of Lord Ram.

The second affidavit led to widespread protests led by the BJP and the government was forced to withdraw it and promise to come back with a fresh affidavit, which now awaits the prime minister's nod.

The government also set up an experts' panel headed by Madras University Vice Chancellor S. Ramachandran, which in its report has endorsed the view that Ram Setu is a natural formation.

The official sources said a committee of secretaries met Friday and Saturday to examine the experts' report and prepare a draft affidavit on its basis.

Last week the issue came up for discussion at a meeting of ministers chaired by the prime minister and attended among others by Shipping Minister T.R. Baalu, who represents the DMK in the central government, Culture and Tourism Minister Ambika Soni, Home Minister Shivraj Patil and Law and Justice Minister H.R. Bhardwaj.

A majority of the ministers in the meeting were reluctant to take a final stance on the affidavit even as Baalu insisted on moving ahead with the project without delay, according to the sources. They eventually decided to wait till the prime minister's return from China. Manmohan Singh left for China Saturday night.

Faraz Ahmad (© IANS / India eNews)