



“A Conversation with Jairam Ramesh”
Minister of State for Environment and Forests, Government of India
4:00pm, Friday, July 31 2009
WWF Auditorium, 172B Lodhi Estate, New Delhi

“India has a strong political, moral and economic case for not reducing carbon emissions”: Jairam Ramesh



In a unique interactive session, Mr. Jairam Ramesh, Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Environment and Forests elaborated on the government’s position and action on three areas: climate change, forestry management and institutional reform in the environmental sector.

On climate change, Mr. Ramesh said that the Indian government recognizes the incontrovertible evidence of global warming and its effects, especially on a local level. A national action plan on climate change has been drawn up and the government has taken a series of steps to mitigate emissions. He pointed out that looking at India’s growth trajectory, in the next two decades India will not be a major emitter of greenhouse gases—as against the developed countries. He thus stated that while India is taking such a series of steps on its own, it cannot accept legally binding emission targets. During the Q&A session that followed, Mr. Ramesh suggested that the developed western countries had no business telling India to cut emissions when they themselves have done little to cut back, while also changing the rules of the negotiations (such as changing base year targets). Given

the unfeasibility of going to scale with renewable energy sources at the moment, it would be foolish for India to not use coal. He did point out that India was working on coal classification technology and also on a project to extract oil from algae. He strongly urged that the basic effort in India has to be to invest in the next generation of clean technology, which would enable us to 'leapfrog' in this sector as stressed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. He also suggested that there is no such thing as 'technology transfer' as no country is willing to share green technology.

On the question of forestry management, he said that the government of India is undertaking a massive renewal of forestry, through measures such as a massive afforestation project (perhaps the only one of a kind in the world), earmarking Rs.11,000 crores for restoration and regeneration of forests and Rs.100 crores for forestry management over the next three years etc. Mr.Ramesh stressed that as against other countries, 250 million people in India are dependent upon forests for their survival—out responses to conservation are hence different. Given that the concentration of tribal, forests and mining/industrial sites in our country are such a perfect fit, it is time to make some difficult choices. Sometimes the choice will be development, and at others, it will be ecological preservation.

In the context of institutional reform in the environment sector, Mr.Ramesh said that a bill calling for the setting up of the National Green Tribunal is to be introduced in the Lok Sabha. The intent is to create environmental courts to tackle all cases related to the environment and forests. In addition, the National Environment Protection Authority, backed by State Environment Protection Authorities are likely to be set up as an independent institution that will regulate and enforce environmental norms. He suggested that the National Environment Protection Authority will be (a) Independent (b) Transparent and (c) Science based. He concluded by stating that he intended to make the Ministry much more transparent and open. While all decisions made by the Ministry may not be acceptable to everyone, it is now time to bring closure to some issues, and to mainstream the environment and ecology as part of the development process.

During the very intensive Q&A that followed, Mr.Ramesh answered a variety of questions pertaining to issues such as the plan to re-introduce and breed cheetahs in captivity, the supposed 'retreat of Himalayan glaciers, the need to clean our rivers through sewage treatment and other measures, cooperation with China in climate change negotiations etc. Mr.Ramesh also tackled sensitive issues related to some policy measures undertaken by the previous Minister which had proved very unpopular, such as watering down of EIA regulations.

The session was moderated by Mr.Tarun Das, President, Aspen Institute India and Vice President, the World Wide Fund for Nature-India, who said that in Mr.Jairam Ramesh, India finally had an intelligent and articulate Minister for Environment and Forests. This interactive session was the first in a series with the Minister which will be organized by Aii in partnership with WWF India to create consciousness about the environment and related issues and thus also create a springboard for action.