

Standing up for environmental responsibility

'Our biggest task is to create a domestic consensus than worry about international ramifications'

By Nilima Pathak, Correspondent, GULF NEWS

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Jairam Ramesh: Minister of State (Environment and Forests)Image Credit: Supplied
New Delhi: Handling several commitments at once is something Jairam Ramesh does with aplomb. The Minister of State, who holds independent charge of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, is driven by issues such forest conservation, improved fuel efficiency and tiger conservation.

A resolute national representative at international forums, Ramesh, a member of the Upper House of Parliament, is also unflinching when it comes to pressing for change on the domestic scene. In an exclusive interview with Gulf News, he spoke about the challenges his ministry must face up to.

GULF NEWS: What are the major issues you have had to address in your role as a minister?

JAIRAM RAMESH: Over the years, an impression has gained ground that we look at the environment department as a formality. Therefore, the biggest challenge is to send a signal that we mean business about protecting the environment and forests. The ministry has different components handling a wide gamut of issues. We not only have a heavy domestic agenda that covers problems of pollution and forest cover but also international issues like climate change.

Has your background in economic reforms helped you in any way in this ministry?

When I took over, people in the industry thought I would be business-friendly, whereas environmentalists were worried and agitated that a supposedly business-friendly person had become minister. But my task here is not to be business-friendly or unfriendly. It's to ensure that the laws and regulations are implemented responsibly and transparently.

The environment ministry is seen as one that creates developmental roadblocks.

Such a perception isn't true. Rather than environment being an obstruction, the environmental laws are not implemented the way they should be. In fact, we give a lot of approvals and the rate of sanctions is over 92 per cent, which is unhealthily high. In the last 10 years, we must have approved about 7,000 projects and each of these have conditions and safeguards attached to them. But unfortunately, we do not have a system of monitoring compliance with these standards. Till now, environment

has not been taken seriously enough, with the result that many approved projects have not fulfilled the conditions associated with the clearance.

Your views on the growth-versus-environment protection debate.

They're not in conflict with each other. We can't have growth first and then worry about environmental protection. They have to be synchronised. But yes, in some cases we have to take a tough call. It's time we looked upon environment not as an obligation but as a fundamental responsibility to make the growth process sustainable. Recently, during a visit to Bapi and Ankleshwar, the centre of the chemical industry in Gujarat, I found the situation quite horrendous. The sheer impact of the pollution level was distressing. Although it doesn't mean we should close down these industries, but the problem needs to be addressed seriously.

Real estate developers say that environmental clearances take a long time.

By law, environmental clearance has to be given in 210 days under the Environment Protection Act, 1986. And forest-related clearance within 150 days under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. Agreed, there are some high profile cases that stretch beyond time — either because the public hearing is not held or the environmental impact assessment is faulty. Similarly, in the case of forests, the state governments give the forestry clearance and then recommend it to the central government. So, in states like Jharkhand, where coal mines are involved, it could take even four years to clear the project. Few cases do get delayed, but the bulk of them are cleared within the time-frame. In the case of forestry we now have the Supreme Court and the rate of rejection is about 80 per cent.

You are not in agreement with the Delhi government regarding the ban on plastic bags?

It's a real complex issue. In the mid-1980s, we opted for plastic bags because we were worried about cutting of trees and wanted to save our forests. But now we are saying that plastic bags are dangerous. I think we need a balance between the two. We must improve our municipal solid waste management system, because due to the lack of it, the extreme step of banning plastic bags is being considered. Some states like Himachal Pradesh have banned them or are using bags of certain thickness, but there cannot be just one solution. Biodegradable plastic can be an option.

Even while Delhi is doing well as a 'green city', it has also emerged as the one with the highest levels of air pollution among all the metros.

We are working towards it and need a multi-pronged approach. A large fleet of buses and three-wheelers running on compressed natural gas have helped. But this is largely due to the Supreme Court's intervention and not because of the government. We are now starting a programme of continuous air quality monitoring and

considering introducing mandatory fuel efficiency norms by 2011. Apart from saving fuel, this will have a major impact on the environment.

You had recently stated that 'we are not going to accept any legally binding commitments on carbon emissions'.

I said that we will take mitigating actions on carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions, but without taking any legally binding international commitments. It's because we believe that historically India is not responsible for the global warming situation. We are 16 per cent of the world's population and account for less than 5 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions. The UN framework convention of climate change talks of common and differentiated responsibility on the basis of historical responsibilities. So, the international binding targets must be taken by the developed countries including the European Union, the US and Japan.

What is your strategy for the Copenhagen meet in December?

We shall negotiate from a position of strength and domestic leadership and that's the key point. The world has to know that India understands its responsibility towards the future generations and is intervening in a manner that moderates the growth in its carbon emissions. But we are following our own conscience and certainly not working in response to international pressure. Although not a part of the problem, we want to be part of the solution. I have spoken at international fora and engaged with China, Europe and the US proactively and constructively. But our biggest task presently is to create a domestic consensus than worry about international ramifications.