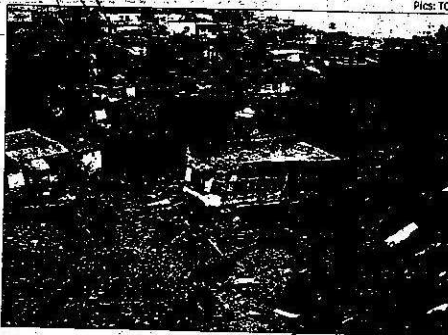


ಇಲಾಖೆ / ವಿಷಯ: DEPARTMENT/SUBJECT: Speaker
ಪತ್ರಿಕೆಯ ಹೆಸರು: NAME OF THE NEWS PAPER: Times of India ದಿನಾಂಕ: DATE: 6/9/2016

DISASTER RELIEF Bringing Kodagu Back To Its Feet Is The Next Step, But Has Sparked A Row Speaker's prod to give LAD funds puts MLAs in a spot Tourism to be Kodagu's ticket out of misery

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WASHOUT: Legislators are none too pleased with speaker K R Ramesh Kumar's directive to donate LAD funds

Bengaluru: Karnataka assembly speaker KR Ramesh Kumar's initiative to help Kodagu flood victims has put MLAs in a bind. The presiding officer wants his legislators to donate Rs 25 lakh from their local area development (LAD) scheme grants, but rules forbid it, and many lawmakers have already spent their fund allocations.

The speaker on August 30 wrote to all 224 members of the assembly, asking them to

REBUILDING KODAGU

be generous and spare money from their LAD funds. Council chairman Basavaraja Horatti followed suit, asking all 75 MLCs to chip in by donating Rs 25 lakh to the flood relief fund.

The directives have raised the hackles of MLAs and MLCs, as they have already donated a month's salary for relief. Also, veteran legislators said the speaker has no mandate to issue instructions to them, and is only the custodian of the assembly.

"It is our duty to chip in in this hour of distress, and there's no denying that the speaker has taken up a great cause. But any move to divert LAD funds calls for an amendment to guidelines," former legislative affairs minister and senior BJP legislator S.

Suresh Kumar said, adding, "Also, it comes at the cost of development work in assembly constituencies, for which legislators are mandated to spend the fund on."

MLAs and MLCs get Rs 2 crore a year under LAD fund scheme, and the money is parked with the respective deputy commissioners, who release funds based on the legislators' recommendations. Every legislator got Rs 50 lakh this year, and many of them have already announced work worth more than that.

Mahalakshmi Layout MLA

K Gopalajiah, for instance, has issued letters to spend Rs 45 lakh, and has proposed to develop roads and parks in his constituency at an estimated cost of Rs 75 lakh.

"I agree that Bengalureans are duty bound to support the people of Kodagu as the river Cauvery slakes our thirst. I've mobilised funds from people and donated Rs 25 lakh to the CM's Calamity Relief Fund. But asking us to spare money from the LAD fund would put me in difficulty. I'm answerable to my voters on development," Gopalajiah said.

DEPUTY SPEAKER CLUELESS

Deputy speaker JK Krishna Reddy said he was not informed about the move to divert LAD funds for Kodagu relief work, indicating that the speaker's decision could be unilateral. "It seems to be a noble cause, but I have no knowledge about it," said Krishna Reddy. "Also, I don't know whether rules permit legislators to comply with the speaker's appeal. I'll discuss this with him."

DIVERTING CASH IS NOT EASY

The speaker's move has drawn criticism from other stakeholders of the scheme.

"Flood relief and local area development are two different issues and should not be mixed," said Harish Narasappa, founder of Daksh, a non-profit organisation that studies LAD scheme expenses, among other activities. "I think the speaker has not applied his mind to the LAD scheme procedures. He should have first taken the government into confidence to put in place the mechanism to divert LAD funds for flood relief," Harish said.

Officials in the finance department said the amendment to guidelines of LAD scheme funds entails a long procedure as the proposal needs to be included in the supplementary budget and get the assembly's approval. Diverting funds without legal changes will amount to breach of privilege.

"There's no such proposal before the government as such," said an official in the finance department. Horatti said the presiding officers have appealed to the government to make required legislative changes to enable MLAs and MLCs to donate LAD funds. "As far as our appeal is concerned, it is only a request, and it's up to the legislators to respond," said Horatti.

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Madikeri: In what would be music to the ears of Kodagu's residents, the tourism department said tourist arrivals have started despite the ban and the sector was likely to bounce back earlier than expected. Around 31 villages of the district have been battered by rain and landslides but enquiries from tourists have resumed already.

C Jagannath, deputy director of the tourism department, told TOI: "We have extended the ban on tourist stay, keeping in mind safety. Most village roads have been repaired. In Madikeri, tourists may face some difficulty due to roads collapsing. But otherwise, everything is normal. We are confident that once the ban order is lifted, tourism may return to normal," he said.

The ban on visit of tourists to Kodagu district has been extended till September 9, from the earlier date of August 31.

Sagar Apparanda, president of the Association for Rural Tourism, said it may take one or two months for full resumption of tourist activities. "The decision to ban tourist stay in the district is

boomeranging. The district administration should have imposed the ban only in Madikeri. South Kodagu was not affected by floods. But due to the ban, the sector will need more time to revive," he said. "The district economy, which largely depends on tourism, has collapsed. Workers have no jobs. All these factors are inter-linked."

With the Madikeri Dasara organising committee deciding to keep the annual festival low-profile, many tour operators feel that one option left for them is to organise theme-based tours. "We need to rebrand Kodagu tourism. Theme-based tourist activities, like herit-

age tourism and eco-tourism may help revive the sector. We are working on this now," said Dinesh Chowta, a tour operator from Madikeri.

"The government needs to take up promotion work or it may take months together for revival. The state government must spread the word that tourist spots of the district are intact. If this sector is not revived, it may add to the woes of the flood-affected as many displaced families are dependent on tourism for their livelihood," Chowta said.

