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ESA: Continued Ambiguity in Government Procedures as Deadline for Submitting Objections Nears is Deeply Concerning, Says Major Archbishop

KAKKANAD: With the deadline for submitting objections and feedback on the Union Government's seventh draft notification regarding the Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) of the Western Ghats set to expire on 25 September, His Beatitude Mar Raphael Thattil, Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church, has urged the State Government to take urgent steps to prepare precise data and maps pertaining to the ESA boundary and submit them while taking the public into confidence.

The Major Archbishop noted that the ESA determination procedures, which have been ongoing for over twelve years, have failed to provide a permanent solution to the concerns of the hill-dwelling population. Furthermore, public anxiety is being compounded by the fact that the shortcomings present in the initial draft notification continue to persist. Specifically, in the seventh draft notification published on 27 July 2026, an area of 9,993.7 square kilometres across 131 villages in Kerala has been proposed as ESA. Consequently, strong apprehensions remain that populated areas and agricultural lands are included within the purview of the ESA.

The Major Archbishop further demanded that, contrary to what is implied in the draft notification, village-level geocoordinate maps enabling the public to verify areas falling under the ESA and lodge objections have not been made available. Moreover, the court order mandating that the draft notification be made available to the general public in the Malayalam language has not been implemented. He called upon the State Government to submit a comprehensive report to the Union Government—complete with maps and exact measurements—that entirely excludes populated settlements, agricultural lands, plantations, other establishments, and townships across the 131 villages, thereby

restricting the ESA exclusively to forest areas and protected zones under the direct control of the Forest Department, while taking local self-government institutions, public representatives, farmers' organisations, and the general public into confidence.

Although the Union Government has issued seven draft notifications regarding the ESA since 10 March 2014, it remains a matter of grave concern why successive State Governments have failed to rectify the errors introduced into these draft notifications through the submission of recommendations from the Oommen Committee report. The total extent of the 131 villages was merely 12,900 square kilometres. Of this, the Oommen Committee report indicates that the total revenue land—encompassing inhabited areas, agricultural holdings, and plantations—across these 131 villages amounts to less than 3,000 square kilometres. This anomaly occurred because the Oommen Committee erroneously designated revenue land within these villages as forest land in its submission. The Government must take immediate measures to rectify this error.

The Oommen Committee report must be withdrawn immediately, and a fresh report and recommendations should be formulated through consultations involving the relevant local self-government bodies and various civil society organisations. Although the State Government submitted multiple reports following the initial draft notification, successive governments over the past 12 years have failed to correct this fundamental error or present a definitive, unified report. It is understood that a report containing geocoordinate maps and precise spatial extents restricted exclusively to forest lands and protected areas has not been submitted to date. The failure of the Government to address the protracted anxieties of citizens regarding land for which they possess valid legal title deeds—along with the resulting gridlock in land transactions, banking transactions, and related matters—continues to leave the populace in a state of deep distress.

Regarding the pending report to be submitted by the State Government in relation to the ESA draft notification, the Chief Minister's statement made it clear that the proposed ESA area stands at 8,590 square kilometres encompassing 98 villages. It must be inferred that this is merely a re-issuance of the report prepared under the previous government. According to Forest Department records, the land claimed as forest/protected zones that could legitimately fall within the ESA across these villages is less than 7,000 square kilometres.

The assertion in the Oommen Committee report that there are 9,107 square kilometres of forest across the 131 villages was a fundamental error. Consequently, the figure of 8,590 square kilometres—comprising forest and protected areas across the current 98 villages based on that flawed report—is likewise incorrect.

Mar Raphael Thattil pointed out that if the final notification is issued in accordance with this Government report, over 1,600 square kilometres of land remaining after deducting the under-7,000 square kilometres of actual forest land in the 98 villages will have to be identified as forest land from the populated areas and agricultural fields of these villages.

This creates a situation where forest laws could become applicable to the land of ordinary citizens.

The protection of the Western Ghats' ecology is essential. However, the lives, dwellings, and livelihoods of the people who have inhabited and farmed the hill regions for decades with valid land titles must simultaneously be safeguarded. Environmental protection and human survival should not be treated as mutually exclusive; rather, a solution must be identified that places human beings at the centre of sustainable development, the Major Archbishop clarified in the statement.

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