

India cannot be made slum-free in five years: officials

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India's fast urbanisation is also spawning greater numbers of slums, forcing millions of people to live under pathetic conditions.

And a year after the government made the grand claim to make the country slum-free, officials say the five-year time-frame is unrealistic.

Housing and urban poverty alleviation ministry (MoHUPA) officials said a committee formed to look into population of slum dwellers has put their numbers sizeably higher than estimated earlier.

'The 2001 census had estimated the slum dwellers to be 23 percent of the population of 640 towns surveyed but latest estimates show their number to be about 29 percent of the urban population,' an official told IANS.

Addressing the joint session of Parliament on June 4, 2009, President Pratibha Patil had announced that the government planned to make India slum-free in five years through a new scheme, Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY).

A year has passed since the announcement and officials said the task of ridding cities of slums is 'complex and huge' to be achieved in five years.

'The aspiration is to do it in the shortest possible time but it is unlikely to be done in five years,' said an official.

The scheme will be implemented at a pace set by a plan of action formulated by the states, the official added.

In the preparatory phase of RAY, which began in March this year, each state is required to prepare its plan of action based on geographic information system(GIS)-enabled mapping for specific cities to be made slum-free. The states will later scale up the programme to make the entire state free of slums.

Unlike previous schemes, RAY seeks to provide property rights to slum dwellers. The programme seeks to tackle shortage of urban land and housing that keep shelter out of the reach of the poor.

According to a National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) report, around 57 percent of slums come up on public land, owned mostly by local bodies and state government, 24 percent along drains and around 12 percent along railway tracks.

The officials said central assistance under RAY will be predicated on the condition that states and union territories assign legal title to slum dwellers over their dwelling space.

The states will also be required to continue three reforms under the JNNURM (Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission) including internal earmarking within local body budgets for basic services to the urban poor, earmarking at least

20-25 percent of developed land in all housing projects (both private and public) for economically weaker sections and provision of basic services for poor.

'The aim is not only to make the country slum free in a time-bound manner but also to prevent future growth of slums by providing housing and basic services such as sewerage, water, street lights, education and health services,' said D. S. Negi, Director, National Building Organisation and Officer on Special Duty, RAY.

A technical group on estimation of urban housing shortage constituted by MoHUPA had estimated the housing shortage in urban areas at the beginning of the 11th Plan at 24.71 million, of which 98 percent pertained to the economically weaker sections and low income groups. The total shortage of dwelling units is expected to rise to 26.53 million by the end of 11th plan.

The officials said the existing schemes for affordable housing and interest subsidy for urban housing will be dovetailed into RAY.

The scheme requires each state setting up a Rajiv Awas Yojana Mission Authority to take decisions regarding land use and town planning.