

Mollem rail double tracking stalled again as REC defers forest clearance

Regional Empowered Committee cites environmental concerns, seeks more information before allowing the transfer of 15.6 hectares of forest land to the Railways; Supreme Court had cancelled all clearances for project in 2022; Goa gov't and RVNL push for track expansion through wildlife corridor

KARSTEN MIRANDA

MARGAO: The Regional Empowered Committee (REC) of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) has postponed its decision on granting forest clearance for the controversial Mollem railway doubling project. The proposal, submitted by the Goa government and Rail Vikas Nigam Ltd (RVNL), remains in limbo due to environmental concerns.

During a meeting on Wednesday, the committee reviewed the request but opted to seek further clarification before making a determination. "The proposal was discussed, but additional information is needed from the project proponents before a decision can be reached," an official familiar with the proceedings said on condition of anonymity.

The Goa government has petitioned the REC's Bangalore office to revoke an abeyance order that has stalled the diversion of 15.6 hectares of forest land along the Kulem-Kalem railway stretch in North Goa. The request aims to facilitate the transfer of land to South Western Railway and RVNL, a critical step for advancing the long-disputed expansion project.

The rail doubling initiative, spanning the Tinaighat (Karnataka) to Vasco da Gama (Goa) route, suffered a major setback in 2022 when the Supreme Court revoked its wildlife clearances. This decision followed recommendations from the court-appointed Central Empowered Committee (CEC), which highlighted the ecological sensitivity of the Western Ghats, a globally recognized biodiversity hotspot and vital wildlife corridor. Ahead



The latest mitigation report outlines various measures to reduce environmental impact, including wildlife overpasses, fencing, drainage systems, amphibian passages, canopy bridges, and early warning systems. However, it also warns that "if these measures cannot be effectively implemented, doubling the track should be reconsidered."

of the REC meeting, environmentalists and scientists submitted a representation urging the committee to uphold the Supreme Court's ruling.

"This project represents an inefficient use of resources and poses significant socio-ecological risks with marginal benefits. The REC must adhere to the Supreme Court's directive and reject the proposal outright," they stated.

While the Supreme Court's ruling canceled previous approvals, it allowed for reconsideration if the Railways submitted a revised proposal to the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), including a comprehensive assessment of biodiversity and ecological impacts. In response, the Wildlife Institute of India conducted a fresh Environmental Impact

Assessment (EIA), titled Mitigation Measures for the Doubling of Railway Track Between Tinaighat (Karnataka) and Kulem (Goa), which was recently submitted to the MoEF&CC. The railway expansion, which involves constructing a second track parallel to the existing line between Mormugao Port and Karnataka's industrial region, was initially approved by the NBWL in April 2020. However, this approval sparked widespread protests in Goa, with residents arguing that the project primarily serves to facilitate increased coal transportation from the port to steel industries in Karnataka.

RVNL, spearheading the project, maintains that the doubling of the track is essential for easing congestion in the ghat section and improving both passenger and freight movement.

God alone knows why the Goa government and the RVNL attempted to move the REC to restore forest clearances held in abeyance by the SC. Entirely foolhardy, as there has been no change in the legal status of the track doubling project since the Supreme Court's 2022 cancellation order. Imagine the REC attempting to buck the Supreme Court! No one in his right mind would even have allowed such a request to be considered. The sooner the RVNL and SWR acknowledge that there will be no second track through Mollem National Park and Mollem Wildlife Sanctuary, the better for all concerned

- Claude Alvares, Goa Foundation

The Damocles sword still hangs over one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, Mollem National Park thanks largely to the initiative of the Government of Goa, which owes an explanation to the people as to why it is so determined to destroy the God given lungs of Goa in the form of the Western Ghats, and what are the accrued benefits to us, the citizens

- Orville Rodrigues, Goencho Ekvott

"Futile Effort": Greens, citizens slam Goa gov't's push for parallel track

MARGAO: In the wake of the Regional Empowered Committee's (REC) decision, environmentalists express a mix of cautious optimism and continued concern over the Goa government's persistent efforts to revive the stalled project.

The Amche Mollem (AM) Citizen group, which has been running a social media awareness campaign for the last several years on the three linear infrastructure projects, said, "We are encouraged that the REC has recognised the potential ecological destruction that the railway double tracking will have on the sensitive biodiversity of Mollem National Park by postponing its decision. We hope that this will result in the committee following the guidance from the Supreme Court and denying the Goa Government's request."

Orville Dourado Rodrigues, founder of Goencho Ekvott which has been leading the campaign against double tracking in Velsao village, pointed out that the threat to biodiversity remains significant. Rodrigues emphasized that the well-studied recommendations of the CEC made up largely of technocrats in April 2021 was adopted by the Supreme Court of India in May 2022 and "in no way must be diluted."

The traditional fishing community, represented by Olencio Simoes, General Secretary of Goenchea Raponkaranchi Ekvott (GRE), reminded CM Pramod Sawant that he had promised in January 2021 not to increase coal handling at Mormugao Port Authority. Simoes highlighted the Supreme Court and CEC's suggestion of a viable alternative for coal transportation through Krishnapatnam port, which would "prevent the degradation of the Western Ghats" and listed the extensive infrastructure for the project, which would need 51.48 hectares of land and include "seven major and 74 minor bridges and 23 tunnels."

Margao civic body to hike fees for municipal services by 10-15%

Team Herald

MARGAO: At a special Margao Municipal Council (MMC) meeting, a decision was taken to revise the various fees charged by the civic body to the public and businesses in the town.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, MMC Chairperson Damodar Shirodkar stated that the revision was necessary as these fees had not been updated for around seven to eight years.

He explained that after conducting a comparative study with the Chief Officer and MMC accountants, they found that despite MMC being an 'A' class municipality, its fees were lower than those of Mormugao Municipal Council, which is classified as a 'B' class municipality.

The proposed fee increases will apply to trade licenses, services such as birth and death certificates, income certificates, trade licenses, property transfers to blood relatives, and other certifications and documents issued by MMC.

Shirodkar clarified that the hike would be around 10-15%, not 50-60%, and that considering the backlog of years without annual revisions, the increase was reasonable.

He further stated that house tax rates would remain unchanged for now, but a 12% interest would be levied as a penalty for late payments.

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Earlier in the meeting, councilors raised concerns about delays in processing house tax payment applications and other pending files.

It was also suggested that MMC implement a single-window system to streamline the payment process for house tax and other municipal fees, a proposal that had been discussed in previous council meetings.

Shirodkar concluded by stating that these revisions will be presented at the upcoming MMC budget meeting, where the budget estimates for the next financial year will be discussed before final approval.

Govt seeks expert help, World Bank funding to tackle sand erosion

Team Herald

MARGAO: The state government is aware of the growing threat of coastal erosion along Goa's shoreline and is working on a strategy that safeguards tourism while addressing environmental concerns. As part of this effort, the government is seeking technical guidance from Deltares, a Netherlands-based institute, and financial assistance from the World Bank.

"We recently held a conference on this issue and have initiated discussions with Deltares, which was chosen for its experience in tackling similar challenges in countries like Norway and Denmark. Their expertise has proven effective in controlling soil erosion to a large extent," Environment Minister Aleixo Sequeira said while speaking to the media.

The government is currently compiling various reports to be submitted to Deltares for review and recommendations. However, Sequeira stressed that any intervention must align with the state's tourism interests.

"Tourism relies heavily on our beaches. While conventional protective measures such as tripods may safeguard the coastline, they could also disrupt tourists who prefer open and unobstructed shorelines. We are still evaluating alternative solutions and will finalise an approach after careful consideration. Additionally, we are identifying a suitable location for a pilot project before implementing the plan on a larger scale," he explained.

MAX. TEMP 35.0 °C
MIN. TEMP 22.6 °C

idharudhar



Watch out! You'll disconnect the entire locality!

FULL STEAM AHEAD



The elevated expressway in Porvorim is finally taking shape, with parts of the road laid over the pillars and construction work proceeding at a rapid pace

'Zomnivele Khell Utsav' kicks off in Raia to revive traditional art form

Team Herald

RAIA: The Zomnivele Khell Utsav, organised by the Tiatr Academy of Goa (TAG), commenced on Thursday with the aim of reviving and promoting the traditional Zomnivele Khell, particularly among the younger generation.

The festival's inaugural event was held at St Theresa Convent High School, Raia, with veteran tiatr artist Caje D'Costa, popularly known as Caji de Curtorim, as the chief guest. He was joined by Headmistress Sr Jennifer Crasto, School Manager Sr Amalia D'Souza, TAG President Anthony Barbosa, Vice-President Marcos Gonsalves, TAG member Avito Pires de Menezes, Zomnivele Khell Director Xavier de Maina, and other distinguished guests, including Arnald D'Costa and Sanju Monteiro.

Addressing a gathering of students, Caji D'Costa underscored the importance of preserving Zomnivele Khell and urged students to engage in composing and performing Konkani songs. He noted the decline in composers dedicat-

ed to creating quality Konkani music and emphasized the need for young people to take up the responsibility of safeguarding Goa's cultural heritage.

He also lauded TAG for expanding the reach of Zomnivele Khell beyond competitions and encouraging greater community participation. Additionally, he acknowledged the government's support in advancing tiatr-related initiatives.

TAG President Anthony Barbosa reiterated the academy's commitment to preserving both Tiatr and Zomnivele Khell, emphasizing their role in maintaining Goa's cultural legacy. He also expressed gratitude to

Chief Minister Pramod Sawant and Art and Culture Minister Govind Gaude for their support and financial backing, which have helped promote tiatr at local, national, and international levels.

Director Xavier de Maina thanked TAG for its efforts in reviving Zomnivele Khell, while students enthusiastically welcomed the festival's message of cultural preservation.

As part of the celebrations, Zomnivele Khell performances were held at various locations across Goa on Thursday, marking the festival as a significant step toward ensuring the continuity of this traditional Goan art form.



Margao Comunidade alleges land grab, says police outpost, wellness centre illegal

Team Herald

MARGAO: The Margao Comunidade has raised allegations of land encroachment, claiming that a police outpost and a wellness centre have been built illegally on its property in Aquem-Margao. The comunidade's attorney, Celestino Noronha, has formally lodged complaints with the district collector, the Administrator of Comunidades, the Flying Squad, and other relevant authorities, urging immediate intervention.

Noronha stated that the construction of both structures—the police outpost and the wellness centre—on Moti Dongor land was done without obtaining the necessary permissions from the comunidade. "It has come to my attention that two structures—a police outpost and a wellness centre—have been constructed on the Aquem Comunidade property at Moti Dongor. Upon a personal inspection conducted re-

CONGRESS SCOFFS AT MARGAO MLA FOR EXPLOITING MOTI DONGOR RESIDENTS

MARGAO: Reacting strongly to recent statements by Margao MLA Digambar Kamat regarding Moti Dongor hutments, Margao Congress leader Savio Coutinho accused the MLA of habitually reigniting the Moti Dongor issue before elections, only to make empty promises about protecting homes from demolition.

"We were genuinely shocked to see him so visibly disturbed and agitated. We never mentioned the demolition of houses but simply pointed out that the Margao MLA has been misleading people by forming committees that ultimately achieve nothing," Coutinho stated, while referring to the recent committee formed to rehabilitate the Moti Dongor slum dwellers.

Coutinho further emphasized that they had only warned Moti Dongor residents about the new "dream" the Margao MLA was selling them.

Recently, I confirmed the existence of these unauthorised structures. It is also revealed that the Superintendent of Police, South Goa, has constructed the police outpost without obtaining the comunidade's permissions," he said.

In addition to the police outpost, Noronha highlighted concerns about a wellness centre operating under

the name 'Urban Ayushman Arogya Mandir Moti Dongor.' According to him, the Directorate of Health set up the facility without securing approval from the comunidade. Calling for swift action, Noronha has demanded that the district collector order the demolition of the structures and ensure that the land is restored to its original state.

River Sal: Salcete's lifeline chokes on pollution and neglect

Team Herald

MARGAO: The River Sal, Salcete's lifeline, faces severe pollution. Raw sewage, thermacol boxes and plastic is ruining its health.

Environmentalists and local citizens have voiced deep concern over the escalating pollution levels in the River Sal and say that the government has turned a Nelson's eye to the illegalities and very little effort has been made to clean its tarnished reputation as Goa's most polluted river. There is growing evi-

dence that the river is slowly dying due to the continuous pollution, with sewage from various housing societies and hotels being discharged into the water, as many of these establishments lack proper sewage treatment systems.

According to residents, the government has allowed construction projects without ensuring the implementation of necessary sewage management systems. As a result, untreated sewage is flowing directly into the river, exacerbating its pollution. Further compounding the

issue, vendors at the wholesale fish market have been observed dumping thermocol boxes into the river, adding to the waste problem. The untreated sewage flowing through pipes along the riverbanks is seen as one of the major contributors to the ongoing pollution.

Local resident Vivek Naik criticized the authorities for failing to take action despite repeated assurances. Santan Pereira, a resident of Benaulim, shared his memories of a time when locals would fish in the river to earn a living.