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Author : Prasad Nichenametla prasad.n@hindustantimes.com

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Ramesh calls govt stand on sanitation 'half-hearted'

Prasad Nichenametla

prasad.n@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: Union minister for rural development Jairam Ramesh has called the government's approach to sanitation as half-hearted and budget allocations a mere token.

In a strongly worded letter to planning commission deputy chief Montek Singh Ahluwalia, the minister, who is also incharge of drinking water and sanitation, questioned the panel's 'insufficient fund recommendations' vis a vis the pitiable status in the country.

During the cabinet reshuffle last year, Congress leader Gurudas Kamat reportedly declined to take over as minister of the department — perceived to be insignificant — following which it was given to Ramesh.

IN A LETTER, RAMESH HAS QUESTIONED PLAN PANEL'S 'INSUFFICIENT FUND RECOMMENDATIONS' FOR SANITATION IN THE COUNTRY

For 2012-13, Ramesh has sought ₹6,780 for sanitation — a fourfold increase over the ₹1,650 crore allocated in 2011-12 — but the plan panel, it is learnt, has recommended an allocation of ₹2,500 crore.

"The step up (requested) is indeed huge and I must explain why this is so. It should be a matter of shame for all of us that almost 60% of open defecations in the world are in India. So, far our approach to sanitation has been half-hearted and if I may

say so, merely tokenism," Ramesh said in the letter.

"We are asking for an additional ₹8,000 crore for both drinking water and sanitation — over what the commission has recommended. Demonstrating our commitment in the very first year of 12th plan is essential," the minister argued.

The ministry wants to use the budget for innovations such as pipe water supply as opposed to hand pumps, integrated housing, water and sanitation, enhancing water quality from 40 to 55 litres per capita daily with focus on fluoride, arsenic pollution.

"Unless we scale up the expenditure on sanitation it is not going to get the attention it deserves," he said.

The plan panel had asked the ministries to restrict their proposals to not more than 15% over the present allocation.