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Govt clears land acquisition for Sunderbans

In The First Phase, The Centre Has Allocated ₹ 5,030 Crore To Repair 263 Km Of The Embankment

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Kolkata: The state cabinet has cleared the acquisition of 3,700 acre in the Sunderbans and cheques for 500 acre have already been disbursed, Sunderbans affairs minister Shyamal Mandal said on Wednesday. The state has to acquire large tracts of land to rebuild sections of the embankment destroyed by Aila in May 2009.

Of the 3,500 km embankment around 48 islands, nearly 840 km was washed away by the cyclone. In the first phase, the Centre has allocated Rs 5,030 crore to repair 263 km. "We need 6,000 acre to take up work in the first phase. More than half the land has been cleared," Mandal said after releasing a research paper on the Sunderbans by Centre for Science &

Environment (CSE). In the paper titled 'Living with Changing Climate', lead researcher and writer Aditya Ghosh looks at the impact, vulnerability and adaptation challenges in the Indian Sunderbans.

"Every night, the Sunderbans sleeps under water. We have to put a sturdy embankment in place or else the Sunderbans cannot be saved," the minister said.

However, getting villagers to vacate land in the islands where the population density is 1,000 per sq km will be extremely challenging, particularly given the Mamata Banerjee government's stand against land acquisition elsewhere in the state. Mandal though tried to create a distinction by pointing out that land acquisition in the Sunderbans was for the very sur-



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vival of its inhabitants.

But can a stronger embankment save the islands from inundation? WWF-India climate change adapta-

tion head Anurag Danda believes not.

"The human settlement in the Sunderbans over a century-and-a-half ago was premature. The islands had not been fully formed then. Now, nature is striking back. It is time we think about resettling the people of the Sunderbans, at least the section that is most vulnerable, instead of spending resources on creating embankments which will get breached again," Danda said.

Since 1930, the sea has eroded 250 sq km in the Sunderbans with the rate of erosion doubling in the past decade. River expert Kalyan Rudra warned that the situation was getting worse as apart from sea level increase and rise in river bed, auto compaction of the premature island was leading to their subsidence, thereby

widening the difference between mean sea and level in the region.

If the Sunderbans is to survive in its present form, the government needs to do a lot more than build a sturdy embankment. The CSE study clearly showed the Sunderbans is extremely development deficient. Around 44% people in the islands live below poverty level; 60% don't have access to clear drinking water; 33% have no access to primary health-care; and only 30% live in pucca houses.

"People in the Sunderbans are vulnerable because they are poor. The number of marginal workers has increased from 49,429 in 1991 to 4.15 lakh in 2001. And as long as they are poor, there will be no adaptation," said Ghosh.