

CENTRE INTRODUCES ANTARCTICA BILL

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Parliament - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these

Expense of white: The base established by the first Indian expedition in Antarctica, in 1982. File Photo

The government on Friday introduced the 'Antarctica Bill' in the Lok Sabha that envisages regulating visits and activities to Antarctica as well potential disputes that may arise among those present on the continent. The Bill also prescribes penal provisions for certain serious violations.

The text of the Bill, which was introduced by Science Minister, Jitendra Singh, on Friday says that it seeks to "... prohibit Indian expedition to Antarctica or carrying of certain activities in Antarctica without a permit or the written authorisation of another party to the protocol... provide for inspection in India by an officer designated by the Central government as an Inspector and to constitute an inspection team to carry out inspections in Antarctica."

Mr. Singh remarked in Parliament that India had been a signatory to the Antarctica Treaty since 1983 and that encumbered India to specify a set of laws governing portions of the continent where it had its research bases.

"Antarctica is a no man's land... It isn't that India is making a law for a territory that doesn't belong to it... the question is if in the territory involving India's research stations, some unlawful activity happens, how to check it? The Treaty made it mandatory for the 54 signatory countries to specify laws governing territories on which their stations are located," said Mr. Singh.

India is also signatory to treaties such as the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources and the Commission for Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, both of which enjoin India to help preserve the pristine nature of the continent. Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury of the Congress demanded to know how India had the right to make laws with penal provisions in territory that didn't belong to it and Saugata Roy of the Trinamool Congress also wanted to know whether there would be a bureaucratic set up in place to govern matters concerning Antarctica. They both demanded that the Bill be passed to a Select or Standing Committee of Parliament for a deeper analysis.

M. Ravichandran, Secretary, Ministry of Earth Sciences told *The Hindu* that not only was India obliged to have such under obligations but it would also clearly establish that any illegal act or "crime" in Indian territory at Antarctica would mean that a person — even if they were a foreigner — would be subject to Indian laws.

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