

Indian medical officials charged in land deal case

Former head of Indian Council of Medical Research is avoiding arrest but denies wrongdoing.

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The arrests of several high-profile current and former officials of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) on corruption charges have sent shockwaves through the Indian medical establishment.

The government-funded ICMR, headquartered in New Delhi, coordinates and promotes biomedical research in India and runs 28 research institutes across the country.

Those arrested by the Special Fast Track Court of the Central Bureau of Investigation include Bela Shah, head of the ICMR's division of non-communicable diseases; Ashok Kumar Srivastava, its executive engineer; and Bhawani Thyagarajan, a retired joint secretary in the Ministry of Health, among several others. Following their arrests, Shah and Srivastava have been suspended by the ICMR while the investigation takes place.

"It is extremely shocking that so many senior officials of the ICMR are in jail", says Ranjit Roy Chaudhury, who is on the board of governors of the Medical Council of India. "Such a thing has never happened in the history of India before and is absolutely unprecedented," he added, leaving scientists and policy makers in shock.

The case follows a comprehensive investigation run by the government's audit body, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, which found that land procurement and irregular transfer for proposed building works by the ICMR between 2002 and 2008 were subject to large-scale irregularities, wasteful expenditure, cost overruns and inadequate oversight.

Land transfer

Specific to recent arrests, the auditor found that land owned by the ICMR-affiliated Institute of Cytology and Preventive Oncology (ICPO) was illegally transferred to a private housing society of employees by the ICMR executive council at a fraction of its market price, causing massive losses to the government exchequer.

The land was meant for construction of housing for staff at the ICPO. Several of the ICMR officials who approved the deal were also members of the private housing society that took on the land.

Nirmal Kumar Ganguly, a former director general of the ICMR and a leading Indian scientist, is also accused of the charges. He has an arrest warrant against him but has so far not presented himself in court. Ganguly is also chairman of the governing body of the Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research in Puducherry, and heads a medical ethics committee for the Medical Council of India. Also wanted is Bhudev Chand Das, former director of the ICPO.

Both Ganguly and Das face arrest if they are not granted bail by a higher court.

Charges were filed against the accused officials by the Central Bureau of Investigation last October, following a two-year investigation under sections of the 1988 Prevention of Corruption Act. If convicted of criminal conspiracy, the officials could face jail terms of up to seven years.

Speaking to *Nature* by mobile phone, Ganguly denies any wrongdoing. "All the procedures were meticulously followed," he says. He contends that the ICMR had all along endorsed the course of action adopted by the accused.

But the government auditor and the Central Bureau of Investigation disagree, saying that permission for the land transfer was not obtained from the central Ministry of Health and that, in effect, the officials had been helping themselves while causing losses to the exchequer running into several billion rupees.