

newslaundry



‘Clamp down’: HT deletes report on Goa land conversion as minister threatens ‘breach of privilege’

Jul 27, 2024 02:01 PM

‘Clamp down’: HT deletes report on Goa land conversion as minister threatens ‘breach of privilege’

The report on green zones being rapidly converted into settlements was based on data shared by the minister in Goa legislative assembly.

 By Tanishka Sodhi

 Jul 27, 2024 02:01 PM ·  4 min. read ·  [View original](#)

On July 23, a report on *Hindustan Times* website titled “21.29 lakh sq m green zones in Goa converted for construction in 15 months: Data” by reporter Gerard de Souza detailed how two changes in rules reportedly made way for the spurt in land conversion. The report was based on data shared by Goa’s forest minister Vishwajit Rane in the state legislative assembly last week in response to a query by AAP MLA Cruz Silva.

Souza’s report named the prominent land buyers: A company named Karapur Estates Private Limited, whose directors include Vishwajit Rane and his wife Deviya Rane; RRR fame actor Konidala Ramcharan Tej; Preetham Reddy Nalla, a Hyderabad-based businessman; and right-wing organisations such as the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti and the Sanatan Sanstha.

But two days later, the story was taken down. The link now appears invalid and [shows](#) a '404 error' notice. So what happened?

Less than an hour before the story was deleted from the *HT* website on July 25, BJP minister Vishwajit Rane [said](#) in the Goa assembly that a “malicious campaign” was being carried out by a national newspaper, which was “anti-state of Goa”, and spread falsehood. He said that since it was happening amid the assembly proceedings, it was contempt of the house.

Rane said he would file a “breach of privilege motion” against the newspaper’s editor-in-chief on July 29. When an MP’s rights and immunities are violated, they may file a breach of privilege motion, which is then investigated. Besides the forest ministry, Rane is also in-charge of the town and country planning, urban development, and women and child development ministries.

The Goa Union of Journalists condemned Rane’s statements, saying it “can have a chilling effect on the media”. Meanwhile, Representatives of the Free Speech Collective questioned the *Hindustan Times* for taking down the story without any explanation.

‘10x more than total land conversion between 1986 and 2005’

The now deleted report had detailed that the BJP-led Goa government approved the conversion of 21.29 lakh square metres of green zones, or 0.057 percent of the state’s total landmass, for “settlement” in a span of 15 months since the government introduced two changes in rules in March 2023.

It stated the amount of land converted in the past 15 months is about 10 times higher than the total land converted between 1986 and 2005.

In Goa, land conversion is a contentious issue and has led to major protests in the past. According to the report, the recent conversions were executed under Section 17(2) of the Goa Town and Country Planning Act, introduced in March last year. It allows changes to Goa's land use maps, justifying them as "inadvertent errors" that need alteration or modification.

As per the section, the government is empowered "to direct the Chief Town Planner (Planning) to carry out such alteration/ modification to the regional plan" if it is of the opinion that such "alteration/modification is necessary to be carried out to the regional plan for the purpose of rectifying any inadvertent error that has occurred in the regional plan, and for correction of inconsistent/incoherent zoning proposals in the regional plan".

The report alleges the beneficiaries included a company whose directors included Rane and his wife. It also quoted Rane as saying that the land purchased by him was not cultivated and a correction had hence been made to reflect that.

'Hindustan Times should have taken a stand'

On Rane's comments in the assembly, calling the news report "a malicious campaign" against Goa based on "falsehood", the Goa Union of Journalists president Rajtilak Naik said it was an "ironic statement."

Newslandry learned that initially, there was confusion among local reporters about whether Rane was speaking

about the *HT* report or a report published in the *Times of India* on the day of Rane's speech.

The *TOI* [report](#) was about the state government's plans of introducing a bill in the ongoing session that would nullify any court verdicts against the approvals granted under the ODPs for the Calangute-Candolim planning area and the Arpora-Nagoa-Parra planning area.

But local journalists and unions said that as a reaction to the statement, *Hindustan Times* took down its story almost immediately, suggesting that Rane's statement was in reference to the same.

Naik said that such statements are "disturbing" and "deter" journalists. "The journalist who filed the story is very much a Goan. Such statements are disturbing and should not deter the actual intentions of journalists just doing their job. The story was done based on data given in the assembly itself."

He added that it was disappointing that *Hindustan Times* deleted the story and that the publication should have instead "taken a stand and supported the journalist."

The Goa Union of Journalists also issued a statement on the incident, saying that the media will not be deterred from carrying out its duty as per the rights granted in the constitution, and that it would continue to support any journalist or news organisation that has been carrying out their duty responsibly.

Meanwhile, Geeta Seshu of the Free Speech Collective questioned the *Hindustan Times's* handling of the issue.

“The manner in which the story was taken down by *Hindustan Times*, without any explanation or reason for the same, is shameful,” she said. “The story was a perfectly-well-researched piece, based on documents. The minister threatening the media is a clear attempt to clamp down on information that is of grave public interest. It’s a very serious issue.”

Newslaundry reached out to BJP leader Vishwajit Rane as well as *Hindustan Times* editor Sukumar Ranganathan with queries on the matter. This copy will be updated on receiving a response.

Complaining about the media is easy. Why not do something to make it better? Support independent media and [subscribe](#) to Newslaundry today.