

PM promises 'new deal' for rural India

NEW DELHI: Promising a new deal for rural India, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Friday said the challenge before his government was to balance the urban-rural divide that posed a threat to social and political stability.

Launching Bharat Nirman, the government's flagship Rs.1.74 trillion (\$38.34 billion) programme for rural infrastructure at a conference organized by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII); he admitted that the divide between urban areas and the rural hinterland had widened.

Manmohan Singh promised a time-bound plan to unlock rural India's growth potential. "As I look at the history of India in the last 50 years, this gap has widened. It has not become narrower and there lies the great danger for social, economic and political stability. We have to reverse this trend," he said.

Conceived as a four-year business plan for achieving identified goals in six selected areas of rural infrastructure - irrigation, water supply, housing, roads, telephony and electrification - Bharat Nirman's goals were critical for unleashing the process of growth in rural areas, he said.

In four of these areas, Manmohan Singh said the government wanted universal coverage whereby every village with a population of over 1,000 people would have an all-weather road, a telephone, water supply and electricity.

In addition, he said that the government intended to build six million houses to address rural homelessness and add 10 million hectares of irrigation capacity.

"The targets are ambitious but with active participation of the state governments, we hope to deliver on time and within 2009, the time our tenure in government expires," Manmohan Singh remarked.

Taken together with the initiative to guarantee employment through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, and the initiative to improve healthcare through the National Rural Health Mission, and education through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the prime minister said this would signal a "new deal to rural India".

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