

# Sepa postpones another controversial public hearing

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KARACHI: Responding to concerns pertaining to a public hearing scheduled against a tribunal order, the top official of the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency (Sepa) announced on Tuesday that the event would be postponed.

It's the third public hearing within seven days that Sepa would reschedule because of its failure to ensure absolute compliance with legal requirements while publicising a hearing.

"We will postpone this hearing. The stakeholders should have been given sufficient time to go through the document as the tribunal has ordered," said Sepa director general Naeem Mughal when his attention was drawn to the fact that Sepa would violate an order of the environmental tribunal if it held the Oct 9 public hearing.

Agreeing with the argument, Mr Mughal said the matter was not in his knowledge. "I have talked to the relevant staff on this (matter) now. The department is committed to follow the law".

Sources said the said public hearing had been scheduled for Oct 9 while the department uploaded its Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report on its website on Sept 27, giving less than 15 working days required under the law to stakeholders to go through the document.

Earlier, the department had called a public hearing on Sept 23 without uploading on its website the EIA report of a residential-cum-commercial project.

According to sources, Sepa is required under a court order to upload EIA reports of projects on its website at least 15 days before a public hearing.

The Sept 23 public hearing, sources said, was brought to Sepa's notice at least 12 days before its scheduled date but the department didn't take any action. It was only after Dawn highlighted the matter that the department was forced to intervene in the middle of the hearing and announced its postponement.

An order of the Sindh Environmental Protection Tribunal dated Sept 13, 2017, states, "We are thus of the view that the agency must make available a copy of the EIA report that it receives on its official website to be accessible by the general public, and must provide a practically usable link to the same in the public notice that it issues to ensure that concerned citizens, members of the general public, experts and stakeholders can actually read and examine the report in a practical way.

Explaining this order, senior lawyer Zubair Abro said that the sections the court had referred to in its judgment included the requirement of the 15-day period that Sepa must provide to the public before holding a public hearing.

The other public hearing whose postponement hadn't yet officially been announced was scheduled on Sept 26.

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