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After trillion, target No. 2

- Govt advances deadline to end defecation in public

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New Delhi, April 27: Flush with pride after breasting the \$1-trillion tape? Here's a tougher task: how to make sure no Indian defecates in the open after 2012.

The Centre today announced an accelerated sanitation campaign to end defecation in public, advancing the original deadline by three years to 2012.

What inspired the government's confidence to revise the target is not known. But the ambitious announcement was made hot on the heels of India becoming a \$1-trillion economy.

If the laudatory effort succeeds — sceptics are already sniffing failure — it will involve the Herculean task of cleaning up the equivalent of the world's largest Augean stable.

The rural development ministry said it would achieve total sanitation by providing all households access to toilets in five years.

"We can say with absolute certainty that the country will be free of open defecation by 2012," rural development minister Raghuvansh Prasad Singh said today, discussing India's Nirmal Gram — open-defecation-free villages — programme that is providing houses and schools toilets and educating rural communities to use them.

Many commentators and foreign travellers have derisively referred to the problem as India's national sport or pastime, sometimes forgetting that the habit reflects the humiliating living conditions of a large part of the population.

The minister today said that every home in the country would have a toilet by 2012. But urban and development studies experts warned that the target was unlikely to be achieved. They estimate that half of the rural population uses open fields, railway tracks, or the sides of highways as toilets.

"This is an unrealistic goal," said Ram Bhagat, professor of migration and urban studies at the International Institute of Population Sciences in Mumbai.

"What about cities -- we have 400, each with a population greater than 100,000, and by a conservative estimate, 10 per cent of the population in cities do not have access to toilets," he said.

In megacities -- with population higher than five million -- the situation could be even worse, he said. The megacity population living in slums -- lacking sanitation facilities -- ranges from 20 per cent to 50 per cent.

"But a target will generate enthusiasm and motivate people, and the infrastructure for sanitation will grow further, which is a good thing," Bhagat said.

Experts cautioned that infrastructure alone won't get the job done. "In rural areas, creating facilities will be the easy part. The hard part will be getting people to use the facilities through behaviour change," said **Ashok Yesudian, dean of research at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai.**

"Some pilot projects have shown that rural folk are comfortable with open spaces, so the efforts to build toilets will need to be accompanied by public education to get people to change habits," Yesudian told The Telegraph.

The total sanitation campaign is now operating in 572 districts with an outlay of Rupees 11,375 crore, most of the money coming from the central government with smaller contributions from states and community efforts.

The programme, launched in 2003, has built 31 million household toilets, 9,997 community sanitary complexes, 357,000 school toilets, and 110,000 toilets in Anganwadis.

Sanitation and health experts said toilet facilities would also drive up the demand for water. “In urban areas, the issue is how to we ensure sustainable use of public shared toilets,” Bhagat said. “It needs better local governance, health education and community participation.”

But the total sanitation campaign appears silent about urination in public, which may be even more widespread than defecation.

