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Nobel winners lobby for India's biggest lab

UNDERGROUND LABORATORY in Tamil Nadu awaits govt clearance

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MUMBAI: About a dozen top scientists from across the world, including two Physics Nobel Prize winners, have written to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh urging him to clear a proposed underground neutrino laboratory, billed as the most ambitious project in Indian science history.

To be located 7 km from the Mudhumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and Tiger Reserve in the Nilgiri mountains, it is waiting only for the Tamil Nadu government's forest clearance. Slated to begin 2007, the project has been cleared by all the concerned central ministries and departments, including ministry of forest and environment.

In a letter dated August 7, the scientists said that, with the India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO) so delayed, the US and China are mulling similar facilities. Neutrinos are key to understanding how the universe evolved and how the sun and stars generate energy.

"Any further delay will be detrimental to the success of the whole project," said the scientists. "INO will bring more science to India and enhance India's role as an important player in front-line science. Time is

SCIENTIFIC AMBITION

- The Neutrino Observatory will be India's largest-ever facility for basic science research.
- The 11th Five-Year Plan calls it a "mega-project" and has allocated it Rs 950 crore.

running out and the competitive edge that INO had is slipping away."

For two weeks, *HT* phoned and sent several text messages to Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh and Science & Technology Minister Prithviraj Chavan, but they did not respond. Tamil Nadu's environment and forest secretaries declined to comment.

As with the large hadron collider in Geneva, which will recreate the Big Bang that created the universe, there is huge international interest in this project, being coordinated by Mumbai's Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR).

Neutrinos are a hot topic in science because experiments already indicate that these elementary particles have properties that might force physicists to recast existing theories.

"The world will not wait for us," said Naba Mondal, INO spokesman from TIFR.

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