

Foreign scribes will need govt nod for travel to border states

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THE GOVERNMENT has asked all foreign correspondents based in India to take “prior permission” before they travel to border states, including Jammu and Kashmir and many areas of the Northeast, thereby enforcing a rule that existed in statutes but was not followed and insisted upon till now.

Stating that the rule has existed for about 60 years, and is “not new”, a source in the government told *The Sunday Express*, “On average, we get (reports of) two violations per week from intelligence agencies or local authorities — that they have come across foreign journalists travelling to protected and reserved areas without permission. So we decided to write to the foreign correspondents and make them aware of the rule, so that they don’t end up in trouble.”

Sources told *The Sunday Express* that if the MHA publishes the names of protected and restricted areas clearly, it would resolve the issue to a great extent. “The ministry should also give approvals (to journalists) in a short span of time, and not take eight weeks,” a source in the gov-

ernment said.

Foreign correspondents who spoke with *The Sunday Express* said that they have travelled to J&K on several occasions earlier but never took any approval.

“We can imagine having to take permission to areas near the Line of Control and such sensitive areas, but having to take permission to travel to Srinagar - that’s a new restriction,” a foreign journalist said.

Venkat Narayan, president of the Foreign Correspondent’s Club of South Asia, which acts as a umbrella body on behalf of foreign journalists, said, “We are going to take it up with Home Minister Rajnath Singh and Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale. We are going to tell them that India is the world’s largest democracy, and should allow foreign journalists to travel freely and report from all parts, including Kashmir and the Northeast.”

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is the nodal interface from the government side with foreign journalists, while rules are framed and decisions taken by the MHA.

The foreign correspondents’ community got the MEA letter on May 22, stating that it was addressing the “important issue” of foreign journalists travelling to

circumscribed areas “without official clearance”.

“It has come to the notice of the Ministry of External Affairs that some foreign journalists based in India, while discharging their journalistic activities or for tourism purposes, have travelled to places which come under restricted/protected areas that require prior permission/special permit,” the MEA letter stated. “Travel to these protected/restricted areas without prior approval/special permission may cause unnecessary access related issues resulting in inconvenience for the journalist.”

The letter mentioned the Bureau of Immigration’s webpage, which listed out the protected and restricted areas. The protected areas include “parts” of Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, J&K, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, and the whole state of Sikkim and Nagaland.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands and parts of Sikkim are within restricted areas.

The letter further stated that the MEA is “happy to help” with facilitating access, and that advance information “in requisite format” before the planned visit would help in arranging special permit from “relevant agencies”.