

# Goa stops offshore casino operations ahead of court hearing

Panaji: After dragging its feet for months, the Goa government has directed the state's six offshore casinos to suspend their operations on grounds of pollution and sealed restaurants on board five of them ahead of a Bombay High Court hearing on the issue.

The Goa State Pollution Control Board (GSPCB) Tuesday night directed the six offshore casinos to suspend their operations for violation of air and water pollution norms.

The notices have been served under sections 21, 25 and 26 Prevention and Control of Pollution Act, GSPCB member secretary Ashok Daiwajna said Wednesday.

„They (offshore casino vessels) have been plying in the Mandovi river without our permission all the while. Before resuming operations again, they will have to apply for a GSPCB licence, which is valid for two years,“ Daiwajna said.

The GSPCB notice issued to the four casino operators who run offshore vessels – Pride of Goa, Caravela, Rio and Maharaja – directs them to stop their operations until they obtain permission from the board. The operators have been given a week to initiate the licensing formalities.

The Food and Drugs Authority (FDA) officials also raided the restaurants on board the offshore casino vessels late Tuesday and sealed the premises for operating without licences.

While Caravela has been in operation for nearly a decade, the other three offshore casino vessels have been operational for less than a year.

The government's move comes less than 48 hours before the scheduled hearing at the high court's Panaji bench Thursday.

The hearing follows petitions by several offshore casino operators challenging the state government's move to shift them from the Mandovi river, where they are currently anchored, to the Aguada bay 500 metres from the shore.

Ahead of the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls, the opposition has had the Congress-led coalition state government on the mat after accusing the chief minister's office, the home minister and several bureaucrats, including former chief secretary J.P. Singh, of allegedly receiving kickbacks for issuing of licences and hasty clearances for offshore casino vessels.

After maintaining over the last few months that Goa would only have five offshore casinos, Chief Minister Digambar Kamat said Tuesday that there was in fact no ceiling on the number of offshore casinos that would be allowed to dock in the state's waters.