**SC halts project in Himalayas over ‘single window’ clearances**

The Supreme Court has served a blow to “single window” clearances, meant to hasten infrastructural development, in the ecologically fragile and seismic-prone lower Himalayan ranges by temporarily staying the construction of a 90-acre hotel and township project in the Kumaon hills of Uttarakhand.

A Bench of Justices A.S. Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan has passed the interim order at a time when Uttarakhand is gasping from the after-effects of killer forest blazes and denuded green cover.

The stay was based on a special leave petition filed by landowner Birendra Singh, represented by senior advocate P.B. Suresh and advocates Vipin Nair and Karthik Jayashankar, raising a question of law whether “single window” clearances could replace prior environmental clearances and the system of submission of sanctioned building plans.

“Whether these precautionary steps to protect a fragile eco-zone can be easily dispensed with on the ground that a single window clearance has been obtained, more so, for a project situated in an ecologically fragile and sensitive seismic zone of the Kumaon Himalayas at an elevation of more than 6,700 feet above mean sea level (MSL)?” the petitioner asked the apex court.

The petition sought a bar on the commencement of commercial projects in the State without the requisite permission under law and comprehensive Environment Impact Assessment.

Justice Oka’s Bench has listed the case for August 12. The respondents were represented by a legal team led by senior advocates C.U. Singh and Aryama Sundaram.

The petition had assailed an Uttarakhand HC decision on April 9, allowing the construction for the hotel project to continue. The petitioner wondered how the April 9, 2024, HC order had elaborately referred to its subsequent order in another PIL plea on April 23, 2024 for its reasonings.