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SC stays implementation of three controversial farm laws

Expert panel to hear farmers' grievances

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NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday stayed the implementation of three controversial farm laws, calling its order "extraordinary" and a "victory for fair play".

The stay on the implementation of the laws means that the Centre cannot, for the time being, proceed with any executive actions to enforce the laws.

The court formed a four-member committee of experts "to listen to the grievances of the farmers on the laws and the views of the government and make recommendations".

At one point in the 11-page order, a three-judge Bench led by Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde said the formation of an expert committee "may create a congenial atmosphere and improve the trust and confidence of the farmers".

The stay, the court said, "may assuage the hurt feelings of the farmers" and make them confident enough to scythe their way to the negotiating table in good faith.

In a concluding paragraph of the order, the court said the farmers' bodies would



Not relenting: Farmers continuing their protest against the new agriculture laws at the Ghazipur border in New Delhi on Tuesday. •SANDEEP SAXENA

"perceive" the "extraordinary" stay as an achievement of their peaceful protest "at least for the present". It may convince these organisations to "encourage" their members to go home to their livelihoods and thus, protect their lives and health and that of others too.

The court said several rounds of negotiations between the Centre and the farmers had produced no results, even as senior citizens, women and children among the protesters were exposed to serious health hazards posed by the cold and the spread of COVID-19.

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Farm leaders reject SC panel as a 'govt. ploy'

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NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court-nominated committee formed to resolve the stand-off over the three controversial agricultural reform laws is "a government ploy", farmer unions said on Tuesday, pointing out that all four members of the committee had actively advocated for the reforms.

The unions reiterated their refusal to participate in the committee's proceedings. Instead, they vowed to

continue their protest "indefinitely", including plans for a "peaceful" tractor parade in the capital on Republic Day.

"We understand that this committee is a government ploy. It is only meant to divert attention from the protest and to reduce the pressure on the government," said Balbir Singh Rajewal, who heads his own faction of the Bharatiya Kisan Union in Punjab.

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SC stays rollout of three controversial farm laws

It noted that deaths, not due to violence, but either of illness or by way of suicide, had occurred already. The court lauded the peaceful nature of the protests and stated that it did not want to stifle it.

However, it noted Attorney General K.K. Venugopal's "support" of a "specific averment" by the Indian Kisan Union that an organisation, Sikhs for Justice, banned for anti-India secessionist movement, is financing the agitation.

Reports of 'Khalistanis'

In his turn, Mr. Venugopal orally remarked in the hearing that there were reports that "Khalistanis" had infiltrated the protests.

The hearing on Tuesday took place in the absence of four senior lawyers, including senior advocate Dushyant Dave and advocate Prashant Bhushan, who had said they represent a bulk of the protesting farmers' organisations.

Senior advocate Harish Salve, who appeared for a party supporting the farm laws, said the four lawyers did not log into the virtual hearing on Tuesday.

Chief Justice Bobde was, however, unperturbed by either the lawyers' absence or statement by farmers on Monday night. "There are as many opinions here as there are farmers. Let the organisations talk to the committee. You can either resolve the problem or you can agi-

tate indefinitely without any purpose," he said.

The court order made it clear that farmers' bodies "shall" participate in the discussions of the committee.

"The representatives of all the farmers' bodies, whether they are holding a protest or not and whether they support or oppose the laws shall participate in the deliberations of the committee and put forth their view points," it directed.

Committee members

The committee consists of Bhupinder Singh Mann, National President, Bhartiya Kisan Union and All India Kisan Coordination Committee; Dr. Parmod Kumar Joshi, agricultural economist, Director for South Asia, International Food Policy Research Institute; Ashok Gulati, agricultural economist and former chairman of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices; and Anil Ghanwat, President, Shetkari Sanghatana.

The committee has to start work in 10 days and submit a report to the court in two months. The government would take care of their expenses.

The court directed that the Minimum Support Price (MSP) system in existence before the enactment of the farm laws should be maintained until further orders. In addition, the farmers' landholdings should be protected.

Farm leaders reject SC panel as a 'govt. ploy'

"All members of this committee are pro-government, and they have been promoting and justifying these laws from the beginning. They have been writing in the newspapers, claiming that these laws are in farmers' interests," he said.

One of the proposed committee members, food and agricultural policy expert Pramod Kumar Joshi, told *The Hindu* he had not yet received any official communication from the Supreme Court, and would not comment until he had seen the committee's terms of reference. He has previously characterised the farmers' repeal demand as "bizarre".

'Big bold step'

Another member, agricultural economist Ashok Gulati, has been a long-time advocate for farm reforms and welcomed the Centre's announcement of the new laws as "big, bold steps in the right direction which will benefit both farmers and consumers".

The other two members of the committee - Bhupinder Singh Mann and Anil Ghanwat - head pro-reforms farmers groups. After submitting a memo to Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar last month, Mr.

Mann had told *The Hindu* that "reforms are needed in order to make agriculture competitive", but urged amendments along the same lines that the Centre has already proposed.

"We opposed the formation of this committee on principle, no matter who was part of it. That is why we issued a press note last night itself, as a preventive and precautionary measure. We did not ask for such a committee, we did not even go to court at all, as our struggle is with the elected government which is responsible for policy decisions," said Krantikari Kisan Union president Darshan Pal. "However, our worries about the process are proved by the constitution of this committee, and who was chosen to be on it...this is a fraud exercise."

With regard to their Republic Day plans, union leaders said the Centre was misleading the Supreme Court on the issue. "We are going to protest peacefully. We don't want to occupy Parliament. We have no plan to go to Lal Qila. On our side, violence will not be tolerated," said Mr. Rajewal, adding that the tractor parade would take place in Delhi as well as in other locations across the country.