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SC moots panel for farmer-govt. talks

Bench observes that the current negotiations have broken no ground and are bound to fail

KRISHNADAS RAJAGOPAL
NEW DELHI

Talks between the Union government and farmer leaders on the three controversial agriculture laws had broken no ground and were bound to fail, the Supreme Court said on Wednesday.

A Bench, led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Sharad A. Bobde, proposed the setting up of a committee of farmer leaders from across the country, including the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) that has been at the forefront of the protests, and government representatives to resolve the issue.

"The committee can talk and resolve this issue. Secure



Tough lessons: A girl attending online classes at a makeshift living space at the Singur border. ■SUNIL KUMAR VERMA

the names of some farmers' unions who want to join... It should include the BKU and other farmer leaders. They should be drawn from across the country. It affects all and

this will soon become a national issue," the CJI said.

The court has impleaded BKU (Rakesh Tikait), BKU-Sidhapur (Jagjeet S. Dullewal), BKU-Rajewal (Balbeer

Chief Justice Bobde responded. "Farmers perceive that it [the legislation] is against them... Your negotiations have not worked, they are bound to fail. If you [government] are willing to negotiate, have some farmer leaders before us who want to negotiate..."

Thousands of farmers, young and old, from various parts of the country, mainly from Punjab and Haryana, have braved the onset of winter and blocked the entry points to the national capital since late November. The Bench scheduled the case for urgent hearing on December 17. "December 18 is the last day before we close for vacation," the CJI noted.

The court was hearing three separate petitions filed by lawyers and law students for and against the long blockade caused by the protests. One of them said the protests had restricted the fundamental right to free movement for the public.

However, the court expressed keenness to directly engage with the farmers first, saying they were the people on the ground. In the absence of the farmers, the Bench turned to the government and asked: "Have you blocked the road?" "The government has not blocked the road," Mr. Mehra replied.

"Then who has prevented the farmers from coming..." Chief Justice Bobde asked the law officer.

Advocate Rahul Mehra, for the Delhi government, submitted that the farmers were suffering largely in the interest of the country. A severe winter was setting in, he pointed out. Mr. Mehra interjected to say that Mr. Mehta was submitting as if he was appearing for the protesting farmers.

Chief Justice Bobde asked the lawyers to take their exchange outside the court while noting that the Delhi government had "nothing to do with the resolution of the dispute for the farm laws".

Moral victory, say farmers

Farmer leaders welcomed the SC's observations as a "moral victory", but said that setting up a new panel as proposed by the top court would not resolve their concerns. They also sent an official rejection of the Centre's proposals. > PAGE 9

Singh Bhangu). Solicitor General Tushar Mehta said the farmers had turned their back on the government's efforts to talk.

"The government is ready and was ready. But they [farmers] say 'either you repeal or not repeal'. They came to talks with placards saying 'yes or no'. Ministers tried to talk, but they turned their chairs and sat with their backs turned to the Ministers... It is my duty to tell this court some other interests have taken over... We want a positive, constructive talk on a clause-to-clause basis," he submitted.