

Oppn unimpressed as Prez refers to note ban, surgical strikes

Address to joint sitting of Parliament welcomed by NDA members led by PM

NEW DELHI, JAN 31 /-/ Lauding the demonetisation decision and the surgical strikes across Line of Control (LoC) as 'bold' decisions in the interest of the country, President Pranab Mukherjee today favoured a constructive debate on simultaneous elections of Lok Sabha and Assemblies and funding of polls to eradicate money power.

The Union government, he said, is committed to combating the "grave challenge" of terrorism and to ensure that perpetrators of such acts are brought to justice. In his address to the joint session of both the Houses of Parliament, marking the opening of the Budget session, Mukherjee spoke about a host of government schemes and initiatives covering aspects like housing, LPG connections, electrification, healthcare, education, farmers' welfare, welfare of the specially-abled, rural development and urban development. When he referred to the demonetisation decision to fight black money and corruption as also the surgical strikes across the LoC as "bold" decisions, there was humming of desks by the members of the ruling alliance. "My government has taken decisive steps to give a fitting reply to the repeated incursions on our territorial sovereignty," the President said. "On 29th September 2016, our defence forces successfully conducted surgical strikes at several launch pads along the Line of Control to prevent infiltration by terrorists," he added. "The strikes were conducted in the wake of terror attack on army camp in Uri in Kashmir in which 17 soldiers were killed. The men-



President Pranab Mukherjee, Vice President Hamid Ansari, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan arriving in a ceremonial procession at Parliament house for the Presidential address on the opening day of the Budget session, in New Delhi on Tuesday.

tion about the surgical strikes in the President's address assumes significance as some quibblers had questioned whether the action had actually taken place. There were also demands for showing proof in this regard. "We are proud of the exemplary courage and valour displayed by our defence personnel and owe a debt of the gratitude to them," the President said. He also talked about the issue of holding of joint elections to the Lok Sabha and Assemblies, favouring a debate on it. "Frequent elections put on hold development programmes, disrupt normal public life and impact essential services and burden human resource with prolonged period of election duty." My government welcomes a constructive debate on simultaneous conduct of elections to Lok

Sabha and state legislative assemblies. Funding of elections to eradicate misuse of money power also needs to be debated," the President said. However, the Opposition members looked unimpressed and did not thump the desks as Mukherjee referred to the government's efforts to check black money or spoke of 'garib kalyan yojna' under which unaccounted money could be declared under a new taxation law. But they joined the ruling coalition members in the applause when the President referred to 'nari shakti' and mentioned the performance of women athletes at the Rio Olympics and induction of women fighter pilots by the Indian Air Force.

Unlike on previous occasions, several benches in the Central Hall were empty. During the earlier Presidential addresses to the joint sitting of the two Houses, extra chairs used to be placed on the periph-

ies of the historic hall to accommodate the MPs, many of whom used to stand and listen to the speech.

By the time the attendance was quite low. Among those missing were Trinamooli Congress MPs who had announced they would attend the proceedings only from February two.

During the nearly hour-long speech, several members were seen clicking pictures from their mobile phones while Anand Sharma (Cong), Ram Gopal Yadav (SP), Sitaram Yechury (CPM) were seen busy in an animated discussion for some time. The Prime Minister was seated next to Union finance minister Arun Jaitley and Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Ghulam Nabi Azad. Former Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh and H D Deve Gowda were seated with BJP veteran L K Advani and Congress President Sonia Gandhi in the front row. As soon as the President's address ended, Tiruchi Siva (DMK) was seen shouting about the suicides by farmers in Tamil Nadu. When Vice President Hamid Ansari was reading out the first and last paragraphs of the President's address in Hindi, SP leader Madhav Singh Yadav was seen leaving the hall. He continued to walk when the National Anthem started playing to mark the end of the programme.

When members were leaving the Central Hall after the departure of the President, Congress Vice President Rahul Gandhi was seen talking to party leader Mallikarjun Kharge and Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs S S Ahluwalia.

"Frequent elections put on hold development programmes, disrupt normal public life and impact essential services..... My government welcomes a constructive debate on simultaneous conduct of elections to LS and state legislative Assemblies"
—Pranab Mukherjee

actively collaborate with other nations in decisively defeating these forces." The President asserted that the government is committed to combating terrorism and to ensure that the perpetrators of such acts are brought to

justice. However, the Opposition members looked unimpressed and did not thump the desks as Mukherjee referred to the government's efforts to check black money or spoke of 'garib kalyan yojna' under which unaccounted money could be declared under a new taxation law. But they joined the ruling coalition members in the applause when the President referred to 'nari shakti' and mentioned the performance of women athletes at the Rio Olympics and induction of women fighter pilots by the Indian Air Force.

PM dismisses Oppn criticism on advancing Budget

NEW DELHI, JAN 31 /-/ Prime Minister Narendra Modi today said the Opposition has no real issue against his government and defended the decision to advance presentation of the Union Budget, to be tabled on Wednesday, saying it will facilitate execution of more development work.

Modi also cited the inclusion of several "common achievers" among the Padma awardees this year to claim it had happened for the first time as earlier the honour would be bestowed on those doing the rounds of power corridors. At a meeting of BJP parliamentary party executive, which was followed by another of NDA leaders, Modi said the early passage of budget would lead to early start of developmental works. Earlier these works would begin only after monsoon had ended, he said referring to the practice when the budget would be tabled in February and passed in May. Opposition parties have slammed the decision to change the long-standing practice, alleging it was being done with an eye on the assembly polls in five states, including the key Hindi heartland state of Uttar Pradesh.

"They have no issue against us," the Prime Minister said, according to NDA sources. He also asked party leaders to ensure maximum presence during the session except for those busy campaigning in the elections. Referring to President Pranab Mukherjee's address to the joint sitting of two Houses of Parliament, Union Minister M Venkaiah Naidu said it outlined the government's "pro-poor" vision with emphasis on the work being done for the poor, Dalits and other deprived sections. Naidu asked leaders to take the message conveyed in the address to the masses, saying it should be their answer to all opposition criticism.

MEA conveys India's concern to US as H-1B Bill moots hefty hike in minimum wage

NEW DELHI/WASHINGTON, JAN 31 /-/ With reports that President Donald Trump is set to sign a new executive order aimed at overhauling H-1B and other work visas, India today said it has conveyed its "interests and concerns" to the US. "India's interests and concerns have been conveyed both to the US administration and the US Congress at senior levels," external affairs ministry spokesperson Vikas Swarup said. However, Swarup didn't elaborate whether the issue was raised after the recent reports that an executive order has been drafted by the Trump Administration and will severely impact Indian companies, specifically IT organisations. The draft of the order was leaked and published by some news websites on Monday. As per President will continue to talk about through executive order and through working with Congress." White House press secretary Sean Spicer had told newsmen at his daily news conference on Monday. Nearly two-thirds of H-1B visa applicants are Indian nationals who either work for Indian IT services firms such as TCS, Infosys and Wipro or the local operations of US firms such as Accenture, IBM and Google.

The new executive order aimed at overhauling work visa programmes like the H-1B and LI, will adversely hit the lifeline of Indian tech firms and professionals in the US. The executive order drafted by the Trump Administration not only strangles H-1B and LI visas, but also increases



U.S. President Donald Trump holds a meeting with small business leaders at the Roosevelt room of the White House in Washington U.S.—REUTERS

inspector raj and ends employment authorisation cards to spouses on such work visas, which was recently introduced by the previous Obama Administration. "You've already seen a bifurcation on immigration and I think whether it's that or the spouses visas or other type of visas, I think there's an overall need to address all of these programmes. You'll see both through executive action and through comprehensive measures a way to address immigration as a whole and the visa programme," Spicer said.

MP Ahamed critical after heart attack

during Prez speech

NEW DELHI, JAN 31 /-/ Former Union minister and Indian Union Muslim League leader E Ahamed today suffered a cardiac arrest during the President's address to the joint sitting of Parliament and is in a critical condition.

According to sources at RML hospital, the MP from Kerala's Mallapuram, is on artificial life support and a team of doctors is closely monitoring his condition. "The MP had no pulse or heartbeat when he arrived at the hospital. A team of doctors carried out a resuscitation procedure following which his heartbeat returned but his condition is critical and he is currently under close observation of doctors," a senior doctor said.

Earlier, 78-year-old Ahamed, fell unconscious soon after he took a seat in the rear rows of the Central Hall. "He arrived a little late. As soon as he sat down, he fell unconscious. Doctors attached with the President who were present there extended emergency help and he was rushed to the hospital," a senior official of the Lok Sabha Secretariat said. At around 2.15 PM, he was shifted to the RML trauma centre's ICU where he was put on ventilator. Prime Minister Narendra Modi inquired about his health.

Indian IT firms see costs rise, dearth of skilled workers

NEW DELHI, JAN 31 /-/ Indian IT firms face the risk of higher operational costs and shortage of skilled workers with the proposed overhaul of popular H-1B visa regime by American President Donald Trump, leading to a sharp slide in tech stocks and prompting India to convey its concerns to the US.

A US legislation that proposes doubling of the minimum wages of H-1B visa holders to USD 130,000, sent IT stocks stocks plunging by nine per cent today on fears that headcount expenses will go up hitting the sector's profitability. Industry body Nasscom conceded that the LoFrenn Bill contains provisions that may prove "challenging" for the sector. It plans to take a delegation to the US in February to meet US administration on this issue.

"Specific provisions of the Bill that need to be considered are that it does nothing to address the underlying shortage of STEM-skilled workers, which has led all companies to have a calibrated strategy of hiring locally and bridging the skills gap by bringing skilled workers on non-immigrant visas including H-1Bs," Nasscom said. The apprehensions came at a time when the USD 150 billion industry is already unnerved by reports that Trump has drafted an executive order aimed at overhauling work visa programme.

The US protectionism could spell more trouble for firms like TCS and Infosys that are already facing strong headwinds from currency fluctuation and cautious client spending. "Since the rationale for the administration and the legislative wing is to protect job opportunities for Americans, our strong suggestion is that they should carefully calibrate the conditions keeping in mind the skill shortage in the US," Nasscom President R Chandrashekar said.

Raising wage levels under new rules for certain set of companies will nullify the objective of protecting jobs for American national-

als, Chandrashekar added. Ministry of external affairs has said India's interests and concerns on the issue have been conveyed both to the US administration and the US Congress at senior levels. Some analysts are of the opinion that Indian companies could easily witness around 60-70 per cent rise in salaries of the H-1B visa dependent workforce. "Hence, this could have significant impact on the net profit," Angel Broking said. Greyhound Research estimates that average margin hit for an IT services provider will be 5-10 per cent, depending on the total base of employees currently on H-1B visas. The current H-1B minimum wage of USD 60,000 was fixed in 1989 and has since remained unchanged.

Meanwhile retaining validity of oldation cards, West Bengal government today announced fresh application for Khadya Sathi (food security) digital card till February 20.

The government was against depriving anyone of food security and has allowed new application for these cards for those who want to join the scheme, state minister for food and supplies Jyotipriya Mallick said here today. Forms can be downloaded from the website or obtained from local food offices, the minister said. He also said that old ration cards will remain valid but after March 1 can only be used for buying kerosene and not for foodgrains.

State Budget session to start from Feb 3

Bill for harsher penalty for vandalising govt property to be tabled



Speaker Biman Banerjee (L) with senior state ministers at his chamber in the assembly—Shyamal Maitra

KOLKATA, JAN 31 /-/ State minister for finance Amit Mitra will present the budget for the year 2017-2018 in the state assembly on February 10. This was announced today by Speaker Biman Banerjee at the state assembly. The budget session of the state assembly is going to start on February 3 and will continue till February 21. On February 3 Governor Keshri Nath Tripathy will address the assembly. Two important bills will be tabled in this session of the assembly, one—the Amendment Bill to the West Bengal Prevention of Defacement of Property Act which stipulates harsher punishment for those vandalising public and private property and the West Bengal College and University Bill which will have provisions for a more active role for the state government in the management of colleges and universities.