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Manmohan calls for judicial accountability

By J. Venkatesan

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh talking to mediapersons in New Delhi on Sunday before departing for London and New York. The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, and Dr. Singh's Cabinet colleagues are in the background. — PTI

NEW DELHI, SEPT. 19. The Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, has expressed serious concern over "growing incidents of corruption" in the judiciary. "It is up to the judiciary to do some soul-searching" to bring accountability and transparency norms," he said.

Inaugurating the third conference of Chief Justices and Chief Ministers at Vigyan Bhavan on Saturday, Dr. Singh said the confidence of the litigating public could be sustained only if, apart from efficient and effective justice, there was a firm belief that judgments would be rendered without any extraneous considerations. The conference — "Envisioning Justice in the 21st Century" — is being held after 11 years.

"A mechanism of accountability, conceived and implemented by the judiciary itself, is the surest way to ensure judicial independence." And, accountability and transparency norms could not and should not be imposed on the judiciary from outside. "An independent judiciary responding to the needs of society goes a long way in strengthening democracy," Dr. Singh said.

'No place for corrupt'

In his keynote address, the Chief Justice of India, R.C. Lahoti, said that 2005 had been declared as "the year of excellence in Indian judiciary." He warned that there would be no place for the corrupt or indolent in the system. "Question marks have been placed on the credibility of the judiciary at times on account of some aberrations which are not the product of the system but are individual in nature and isolated cases."

Dr. Singh said: "The judicial family must consider the ills that face the judicial system with concern and find quick solutions for it. Any further delay in finding such solutions will only jeopardise the integrity and efficacy of judicial institutions."

Reducing backlog

Asking the CJI to evolve methods for greater accountability of judiciary, he assured him that the executive would respond positively to the initiatives the CJI might take in this regard. He expressed concern over the backlog of over 20 million cases in subordinate judiciary and said his Government was committed to "provide whatever support necessary to cut delays in High Courts and lower levels of judiciary particularly those related to under-trials."

The problem could be addressed by reducing the load on courts and judges and by improving the productivity and efficiency of courts so they could process more cases and in a faster manner. Another way was to restrict the quantum of cases that came to courts.

Stressing the need for modernisation of the judiciary, Mr. Justice Lahoti said that court records had to be computerised and facilities for e-filing and hearing through video-conferencing introduced. He also wanted inter-linking the Supreme Court with the High Courts and the latter with the subordinate courts. He said that he had mooted a proposal to the Centre to establish a cell in the Supreme Court comprising experts on the judicial system, Information Technology and management to prepare the blue print for this.

Resolutions

The conference resolved to bring Indian courts into the 21st century by introducing computers, Internet, video-conferencing, digital signatures and other technology marvels to cut delays and expedite justice. Resolutions aimed at modernising courts, eliminating arrears, encouraging alternative ways of resolving disputes and improving judges' service conditions were adopted.

Those who participated in the conference included the Union Law Minister, H.R. Bhardwaj, the Union Minister of State for Law, K. Venkatapathy, the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, Jayalalithaa, the Punjab Chief Minister, Amrinder Singh, the Karnataka Chief Minister, Dharam Singh, and the Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi.