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Om Birla keeps away from House

Speaker upset at repeated scuffles

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla kept away from the House for the second day on Thursday, reportedly upset at the repeated scuffles that have broken out on successive days, ever since the second part of the Budget session convened on Monday.

Mr. Birla was sitting in his chambers, but did not preside over the proceedings. When this was remarked upon by members on Thursday morning, Bhartruhari Mahtab of the Biju Janata Dal, who is part of the panel that presides over the House in the Speaker's absence, said, "Disrupting proceedings of the Lok Sabha does not bring credit to anyone, and Speaker Birla is saddened by the behaviour of some members."

All-party meet

Sources in Mr. Birla's office said he was particularly aggrieved by disruptions that continued on Tuesday after he held an all-party meeting in his chambers that morning, and assured members of a discussion on the Delhi riots on March 11 in return for the Opposition's cooperation to clear important government business.

"On Tuesday itself, the incident involving women



Om Birla

MPs of the Congress and the BJP occurred, with a repeat on Wednesday. These were unprecedented scenes. This was after the Opposition assured the Speaker [of cooperation]," a close aide to the Speaker said.

Whenever there were stand-offs of this kind in the past, other Opposition parties tried to broker peace. This time, however, the battle lines are clearly drawn. Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh was one of the few who managed to meet Mr. Birla in the past two days. No one is sure how this stand-off is to be ended.

The suspension of seven Congress MPs and the constitution of a committee to go into the incidents that led to the suspension are only likely to harden stances across the Treasury-Opposition divide.