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Demand for judicial probe into blast nixed

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THE State government on Monday rejected the Opposition Congress' demand for a judicial probe headed by a High Court judge into the blast at a stone quarry near Shivamogga that killed six people, and ordered an investigation by the revenue secretary.

Responding to a debate in the Assembly, **Home Minister Basavaraj Bommai** said the revenue secretary will conduct a detailed probe and how illegal explosives entered the state. "Since the Deputy Commissioner is also blamed, we have decided to conduct the probe through the revenue secretary," he said, as Leader of Opposition Siddaramiah insisted that the government order a probe by a sitting judge of the Karnataka High Court. He then walked out of the House.

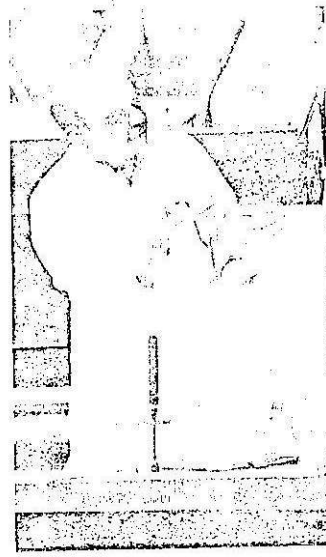
Bommai said the blast site was in an eco-sensitive area in the buffer zone of the Western Ghats, where mining cannot

be done, but crushing units are allowed. He said illegal mining is still rampant.

In 2014-15, the State registered over 4,000 cases related to mining violations, around 3,000 cases in 2016-17, around 2,000 in 2017-18, and 900 in 2018-19. There is a nexus between quarry owners and explosives suppliers, Bommai said, adding that they have constituted a Mining Preservation Task Force that includes officials from mining, revenue, forest, environment and police departments.

Bommai said police have been given directions to convert IPC 304 (Punishment for culpable homicide not amounting to murder) to IPC 302 (Punishment for murder) wherever required. Bommai also said he has directed police to make a detailed map of explosives availability in all existing mining areas. In the last eight months, raids by the Internal Security Division found 17,000 gelatin sticks, he added.

Initiating the debate on the



issue earlier and demanding a judicial probe, Siddaramiah had said politicians and officials colluded to allow illegal mining. Fifteen days before the blast, the district administration was informed about illegal activities, but failed to take action. "Criminal cases must be registered against officials and all those responsible and not taking action to stop illegal mining," he said, and added that transportation of such a large quantity of explosives from Andhra Pradesh to Karnataka clearly shows intelligence failure.

Cong MLC seeks NIA investigation

"The NIA should probe the Hunasodu blast. How can 1,350 kg of explosives enter a landlocked district like Shivamogga, from where the Chief Minister haunts? It cannot happen without political patronage," alleged Congress MLC B K Hariprasad. "I stand by the Congress demand for a High Court judge probe, but NIA can investigate it, considering its sensitivity. It's a serious intelligence failure." The Council, under Rule 68, took up the Hunasodu blast for discussion on the issue of the sensitive Western Ghats, and urged the government to discourage illegal mining and quarrying. MLAs sought to know how so much explosive material can enter a district. While BJP's Ayanur Manjunath said the environment must be protected, Opposition leader S R Patil, Chief Whip M Narayana Swamy and MLCs K C Kondaiah and R B Thimmapur said illegal quarrying and mining should be curbed. MLC PR Ramesh claimed there are 2,000 illegal quarries, and royalty would be about Rs 1,200 crore annually.