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Proposal to stay farm laws stands: Modi

On violence during the tractor rally on Republic Day, he says the 'law must take its own course'

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NEW DELHI

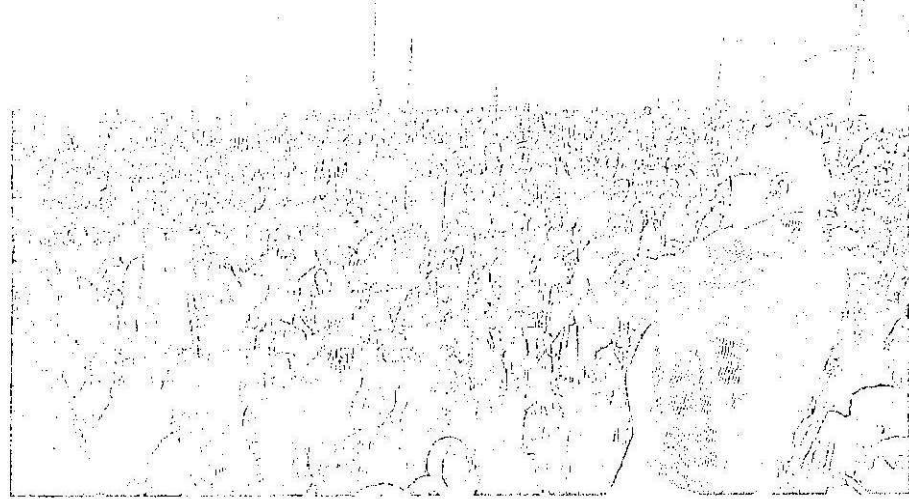
Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday said at an all-party meeting of floor leaders in Parliament that the government's proposal of suspending the implementation of three farm laws, against which farmers' unions have been protesting for months, still stood, and that any resolution of the issue "should be found through dialogue".

"We all have to think about the nation," the Prime Minister added.

The remarks came after a number of Opposition leaders, including Ghulam Nabi Azad of the Congress, Trinamool Congress's Sudeip Bandyopadhyaya, Shiv Sena's Vinayak Raut and Shiromani Akali Dal's Balminder Singh Bhunder, spoke about the long agitation by farmers' unions on Delhi's borders.

Significantly, Janata Dal (U) leader R.C.P. Singh supported the government position on the laws.

"I want to reiterate what [Agriculture Minister] Narendra Singh Tomar told farmers. Mr. Tomar had said we've not reached a consensus but are giving farmers an



Expressing support: Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) leader Abhay Chautala addressing people during the farmers' protest at the Delhi-U.P. border in Ghazipur on Saturday. ■ SANDEEP SAXENA

offer and they may go and deliberate. He told farmers that he was just a phone call away," Mr. Modi is reported to have told the Opposition leaders during the meeting.

On the violence during the tractor rally by farmers' groups on Republic Day and the siege of the Red Fort, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi quoted Mr. Modi as stating that the "law must take its own course" with regard to the incident.

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Unions point finger at BJP for violence

The BJP on Saturday came under sharp criticism from farmer outfits and political parties, a day after violence broke out at Delhi's Singhu border during a protest reportedly by 'locals' seeking to evict agitating farmers from the site. Farmers have been protesting against the Centre's farm laws for over two months at different sites on Delhi's borders. ▶ PAGE 9

Ready to resume talks: farmers

PRISCILLA JEBARAJ
NEW DELHI

Farm unions say they are open to resuming talks on the three farm laws but accuse the government of offering dialogue on the one hand while harassing farmers on the other by cutting off mobile Internet, threatening eviction and ignoring violence from locals.

With new groups of farm-

ers from Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab streaming into the border protest sites again, several union leaders say they expect to be able to negotiate from a position of renewed strength.

The Union Home Ministry on Saturday ordered the suspension of Internet for two days at Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur, the three main protest sites on Delhi's bor-

ders, where thousands of farmers have been camped for over two months.

The U.P. police and local administration have attempted to evict protestors from the Ghazipur site, while local residents, backed by BJP leaders, clashed with protesting farmers in Singhu on Friday.

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Ready to resume talks, say farmers

"It is the government which has attempted to derail the debate by inciting violence and communalising the issue," said Kavitha Kuruganti of the Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch.

"The government says it wants a dialogue, but it is trying to weaken the farmers in so many ways, cutting off our communications, our water and power, setting up local people against us. We have to deal with that first," Ms Kuruganti said adding that union leaders have not had meetings about resumption of talks because they have been preoccupied with these urgent matters.

"We have never closed the door on talks. We have come all the way to Delhi in order to talk to the government," she said.

Punjab leader Jagmohan Singh, who heads one of the largest factions of the Bharatiya Kisan Union, said the unions are interested in resuming negotiations if the Centre is open to their demands.

"Our doors are open 24 hours. If the government proposals are positive, we are ready to talk. My assessment is that the government will retreat, but no one has approached us yet," he said.

Krantikari Kisan Union president Darshan Pal, who has been a key player in the talks with the government, as well as in linking the Punjab unions to the national movement, said the renewed mobilisation of protesters from several States would strengthen the unions' position.

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Proposal to stay farm laws stands, says PM

He also condemned in strong words the desecration of a statue of Mahatma Gandhi in America, saying that all must reflect on what was being spread about in the country.

Political leaders, however, have insisted on a separate discussion on farmers issues, especially the three laws.

In a meeting held by Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla on Friday, the same demand was kept but leaders were told that they could raise these issues during the debate on the Motion of thanks to the President for his address to both Houses of Parliament set to be initiated after the Budget is tabled.

On Friday, in separate press conferences, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and Shiromani Akali Dal leader Sukhbir Singh Badal extended support to the agitation by farmers and Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader Rakesh Tikait.

Nationalist Congress Party chief Sharad Pawar tweeted that his party had raised the issue of farmers and discussed the women's reservation Bill as well. "New laws will adversely impact the Minimum Support Price (MSP) procurement infrastructure thereby weakening the Mandi system. MSP mechanism has to be ensured and strengthened," he tweeted after the meeting.