

Budget session begins; Govt pledges probity in governance, slew of measures in offing

With scams denting its image, Government today pledged to usher in reforms for greater transparency, probity and accountability in governance and to enact a slew of legislations to tackle bribery by domestic and foreign public officials.

In an hour-long address to the joint sitting of Parliament, his first, President Pranab Mukherjee also touched on various issues like slower growth of economy and steps to deal with factors responsible for the slowdown.

Against the backdrop of the recent gang rape and brutal assault on a 23-year-old girl in Delhi, he expressed deep concerns over incidents of sexual offences against women and referred to the promulgation of an ordinance providing for stringent punishment in such cases.

"My government remains committed to ushering in reforms for greater transparency, probity, integrity and accountability in governance," said Mukherjee, days after the country was rocked by yet another scam in the Rs 3,600 crore deal for purchase of VVIP helicopters from an Italian company AugustaWestland.

"To this end, my government attaches priority to the enactment of legislation proposed in the Whistle Blowers' Protection Bill, the Prevention of Bribery of Foreign Public Officials and Officials of Public International Organizations Bill, Citizens' Right to Grievance Redress Bill, and The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Bill, which already stand introduced in the Parliament," he said.

The President said the government is also considering amendments to the Prevention of Corruption Act to punish the guilty and protect the honest public servants "more effectively".

The address, a constitutional requirement, marks the commencement of the Budget session of Parliament.

Mukherjee also announced that government proposes to introduce the Judicial Standards and Accountability Bill in this session as a "significant" measure towards judicial reforms.

The President devoted a considerable part of the speech to the economic situation and the burden of gathering anxieties about slowdown, job security and employment prospects.

"People are concerned about the security of our women and children. They are also anxious about timely delivery of their entitlements and about persisting social and economic inequality," he said.

Mukherjee said the past year has been "very difficult one" for the global economy. "Europe is in recession. Most emerging markets are growing very slowly. It has been a difficult year for India also. Both global and domestic factors have affected our growth.

"We need to address the impact of both. My Government has responded to the situation by taking several measures to revive investment activity and investor sentiment," he said.

Mukherjee, who was Finance Minister before his election as President last July, noted that the Indian economy is currently experiencing slower growth.

"Real GDP grew by 5.4 per cent in the first half of the current fiscal year. This is significantly lower than the average of around 8% in the last decade. Our slower growth is the consequence of a combination of global and domestic factors," he said.

The President assured the nation that the government was taking steps to deal with the factors responsible for the slowdown.

"Inflation is easing gradually but is still a problem. In recent months, there have been positive developments too. There has been a moderation in core inflation and recovery in growth is likely. Policy measures announced during the year have also restored optimism at home and abroad," he said.

"My government has announced a road map for fiscal consolidation by containing the current year's fiscal deficit at 5.3 per cent of the GDP. The Government is also working with State Governments to reach a consensus on the Goods and Services Tax," he said.

In his speech, he also referred to the enactment of a "path-breaking" the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, providing for stringent punishment for persons who commit or abet such offences.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Bill has already been passed by Lok Sabha for ensuring a safe and secure environment for women in work places.

"My Government is also deeply concerned about incidents of sexual offences against women. After considering the recommendations of the Justice J.S. Verma Committee, the Government has promulgated an ordinance, amending the criminal law to provide for stringent punishment for heinous sexual offences against women.

"The Government has also begun to implement a series of administrative measures to improve the safety and security of women in the country," the President said. On foreign policy, the President said India continued to seek peace, stability, cooperation and economic development in the sub-continent.

"We attach the highest priority to relations with our immediate neighbours. With Pakistan, we have made progress towards normalization of relations, strengthening mechanisms for bilateral trade and facilitating greater people-to-people contact," Mukherjee said.

In an apparent reference to the recent beheading of an Indian soldier on the Line of Control, he said while India remained committed to taking the process forward, "it is also important that Pakistan abides by its commitments and desists from acts that contribute to a trust deficit".

He said the government proposes to introduce a Constitutional Amendment Bill in Parliament to give effect to the provisions of the Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh and its 2011 Protocol, which will strengthen border management and security.

The President said the government was making progress in the engagement with Sri Lanka, including in efforts to resettle and rehabilitate the internally displaced persons there and to ensure a life of peace, dignity and equality for the Tamil people.

Mukherjee said India will work with the new Chinese leadership to reinforce the positive direction of our relationship.

On the United States, Mukherjee noted that the Strategic Partnership with Washington has deepened, with progress across all areas of relationship and India looks forward to intensifying this engagement during the second term of President Barack Obama.

Expressing commitment to dealing with Left Wing Extremism in a comprehensive manner, the President said the government was pursuing a two-pronged approach of conducting "proactive and sustained" operations against extremists and focusing attention on development and governance issues in extremist affected areas.

A new scheme for construction and strengthening of 400 police stations has been started in the affected areas. The first phase of the plan for improving road connectivity in 34 most affected districts at a cost of Rs 7,300 crore is likely to be completed by March, 2015, he said.

He acknowledged that the security situation in Jammu and Kashmir and the North East has shown a "perceptible improvement".

The number of tourists visiting Jammu and Kashmir has increased from 8.99 lakh in 2011 to 12.37 lakh in 2012. Compared with 2011, the number of fatalities in incidents of terrorist violence in 2012 declined by nearly half, he said.

(Economic Times)