

## Congress looks at options in Kashmir

The withdrawal of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) from the Congress-led coalition in Jammu and Kashmir Saturday sent the Congress into a huddle to chalk out its future strategy in the poll-bound state.

While Congress leaders in the national capital refused to comment on the development, party sources said Prithivraj Chavan, the Congress general secretary in charge of Kashmir, was closeted with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to discuss the emerging political scenario.

'This is not a major setback for the party as the move was expected for the past few weeks. Elections are to be held in a few months in the state so we are not worried,' said a senior Congress leader, not wishing to be named.

The party is likely to urge Jammu and Kashmir Governor N.N. Vohra to allow the government of Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad to continue in a caretaker capacity.

'In case Azad is not allowed to continue, the state may be put under the president's rule,' the Congress leader said.

Assembly elections are due in the state by November.

The PDP withdrew from the coalition Saturday following differences with the Congress on the allotment of 40 hectares of forest land to the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB) for pilgrims visiting the holy shrine near Srinagar.

PDP has alleged that the land was being used to set up permanent structures and settling Hindus to change the demographic profile of the Muslim majority state.

The government move has led to violent protests in the Kashmir Valley.

The PDP withdrawal comes as a further jolt to the party already reeling under electoral defeats in several states and persistent threats of the Left parties of withdrawing support to the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh over the India-US civilian nuclear deal.

Meanwhile, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) preferred to focus on the land controversy rather than its political fallout.

'Who is supporting whom and where is inconsequential for the BJP. But any step to provide facilities to devotees anywhere in the country is a matter of right and any attempt to deprive them of the benefits would be treated as unconstitutional,' BJP spokesman Rajiv Pratap Rudy told IANS.

'Any force that acts in an unconstitutional manner would be working against the interests and unity of the nation,' he added.

'The Congress government, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi are keeping quiet on the issue. They should make their stand clear and intervene in the interest of the Hindu minority in Kashmir,' Rudy maintained.

( © IANS / India eNews)