

Protests, shutdown in Jammu over Amarnath land row

Activists of Hindu groups took to streets and held noisy protests during a shutdown here Wednesday, demanding that a controversial plot of land in the Kashmir Valley be handed over to the Amarnath shrine trust and Governor N.N. Vohra be recalled from the state.

An indefinite shutdown to protest the government move cancelling the land transfer to the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB) was suspended in the Jammu region last week.

But once again Wednesday, most of the shops, business establishments and educational institutions in Jammu city remained closed and traffic was off the roads in response to the 'Jammu bandh (shutdown)' call by the Amarnath Yatra Sangarsh Samiti (AYSS).

Agitated people burnt effigies of Governor Vohra, whom they blamed for initiating the process of returning the land to the government soon after assuming his office.

The protesters burnt tyres and blocked the Jammu-Pathankote Highway, which links the state with the rest of India. The Jammu-Srinagar National Highway, the only road link to the Kashmir Valley, was free of any such protests.

'It was a peaceful bandh (shutdown),' said AYSS chairman Leela Karan.

The protests were to register people's resentment against the government, and to press the demands for restoration of the land to the shrine board and recall of the governor, and 'not to harm anyone', he told reporters.

The AYSS is an umbrella group of 28 social and political outfits demanding the plot be returned to the SASB. The 40-hectare land in a designated forest in north Kashmir's Baltal area was taken back by the state government July 1 after the state cabinet rescinded the allotment May 26.

Jammu and Kashmir was rocked by a series of violent protests over the controversial land transfer order. The Muslim-dominated Kashmir Valley opposed the move, forcing the government to revoke the deal.

The cancellation angered some Hindu groups in Jammu which have been demanding that the land be given back to the shrine board for the facilities of thousands of pilgrims to the mountainside shrine in south Kashmir, housing a Shiva 'lingam' or a stalagmite structure.

Activists of the AYSS demonstrated for over 10 days in Jammu until July 8, when the conglomerate declared it was suspending the protests for a week to allow the government to 'rectify its mistake'.

Vohra had invited the protesting parties, groups and people for a dialogue but could not get the agitators on the table. However, some of the political parties, the Congress, the National Conference and delegations of Gujjars and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Jammu met him and held detailed discussions on the situation.

In a message Tuesday evening, Vohra said the shrine board would continue to play its statutory role with 'zeal and dedication' and as such there was no dilution in its 'authority or role'.

But the agitators insisted that he should first restore the land to the shrine board, before asking them to sit across the table.

'He must restore the land to shrine board, rest would follow,' the AYSS chairman told reporters.

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