

West Bengal government, governor contradict each other over Singur talks

Even as West Bengal Governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi Friday said talks between the state government and the opposition Trinamool Congress-led farmers body to resolve the standoff over the Tata Motors' Singur plant were deferred on the request of the administration, the chief minister claimed it was the governor who wanted the meeting postponed.

The talks were set to be held Friday morning at the Council Chamber of the Raj Bhavan but after meeting the Trinamool Congress delegation, the governor told reporters that the state government wanted the talks to be postponed for a few hours.

'The state government urged me to postpone the meeting by a few hours. Accordingly, I have requested the opposition to reassemble later in the day at 4 p.m,' he said.

However, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee said: 'The governor had requested the Trinamool Congress to suspend the agitation temporarily and open the highway but that was not done. So, the governor postponed the meeting.'

Gopalkrishna Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, held a series of preparatory talks Thursday with the government, delegation of the farmers' body Krishijami Jiban Jibika Raksha Committee (KJJRC) and chairperson of the commerce and industries standing committee Sudip Bandyopadhyay to find an acceptable formula to resolve the impasse stalling work at the factory that aims to build the world's cheapest car Nano.

Trinamool Congress-backed farmers have been holding protests since Aug 24 at the company's factory at Singur, wanting 400 acres of land - of the 997.11 acres acquired for the project - to be returned. The 400 acres are meant for ancillary industries.

Speaking to the huge media contingent at the Raj Bhavan, the governor said Friday that he was hopeful of finding an amicable solution to the Singur issue. 'Yesterday (Thursday) we had very fruitful discussions. The government and the opposition asked me to play an active role on the issue.'

On the land row, the governor said: 'The law of the land should be maintained. Peaceful and democratic protest is the right of everyone.'

Asked about the Durgapur Expressway which had remained blocked for days due to the KJJRC agitation, he said: 'I am very happy the opposition saw the problem and ensured the national highway became operational'.

Gandhi is being assisted in the talks by retired judge Chittatosh Mukherjee, who has been appointed legal adviser to the governor for the talks.

After the KJJRC's protests intensified, the Tata group last week suspended work at the site, which employs some 800 people, including engineers from South Korea and Singapore, saying it will not put its employees at risk. It also threatened to relocate the project to some other state if the protests continued.

On Wednesday, a farmer who had sold his land willingly to the Tatas for the Nano project committed suicide after the company announced it was suspending work. His three sons were employed in the company as guards and they stood to lose their jobs. The suicide has come as a jolt to the Trinamool Congress-led movement and many have started coming out in the open to support the project that aims to build the Nano, whose dealer price will be Rs.100,000 (less than \$2,500).

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