

Pressure grows on Indian PM over telecom scam

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is facing his biggest crisis since re-election as his government reels under a massive corruption scandal involving the sale of 2G telecommunication licences below market prices.

- By Ajay Jha, Chief Correspondent
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New Delhi: Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is facing his biggest crisis since re-election as his government reels under a massive corruption scandal involving the sale of 2G telecommunication licences below market prices.

With his government coming under fire in the upper and lower houses of parliament, Singh came under more pressure on Thursday, with the Supreme Court asking him to depose a sworn statement explaining his inaction following calls to prosecute former telecommunication minister Andimuthu Raja.

Janata Party President and former law minister Subramaniam Swamy contends that the Prime Minister's Office responded to only one of his five letters calling for Raja to be prosecuted, and that after a lapse of 16 months. Furthermore, he says he received a letter from Raja himself, explaining why the former's request for the latter to be prosecuted was being denied.

As a result of the embarrassment, the government on Friday announced that Singh will henceforth be represented in this matter by Attorney-General Ghoolam E. Vahanvati, rather than Solicitor-General Gopal Subramaniam.

"It is not a question of replacement but of better coordination," Subramaniam said. "I will continue to represent the central government and the Department of Telecom while the attorney general will represent the prime minister."

The telecommunication scam, which resulted in Raja's resignation being accepted on Sunday, has rocked the country. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) submitted a report saying that Raja had flouted all the rules and cost the exchequer Rs1.76 trillion (Dh143.19 billion).

The opposition has paralysed parliament since November 10 and is demanding a joint parliamentary committee probe into the scandal. This was once again rejected by the government yesterday, which said that while the Central Bureau of Investigation was probing the telecom scam, the opposition-led Public Accounts Committee would look into the CAG report.

The deadlock forced the adjournment of both houses of parliament again yesterday.

Scandal: What is at stake for the prime minister?

India's attorney general, the country's highest legal officer, will file the affidavit on behalf of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh by today, before appearing before the Supreme Court in person on Tuesday.

The court will examine the evidence of Singh's interactions with former telecom minister Andimuthu Raja, and the validity of Opposition MP Subramanian Swamy's charge that the prime minister failed to act on his complaint.

The court cannot prosecute the prime minister but could say he failed to investigate Raja. Any suggestion that Singh ignored a case for prosecution would deal a severe blow to his reputation and call his leadership into question.

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