

SC CONSTITUTES PANEL TO LOOK INTO ISSUES PLAGUING JAILS IN COUNTRY

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Justice Madan Lokur and Attorney-General K.K. Venugopal sparred on whether the Supreme Court's orders on PIL pleas, such as those on better facilities for undertrial prisoners, amounted to unreasonable expenditure on the public exchequer.

The exchange began when Mr. Venugopal, for the government, said courts should pass orders bearing in mind the budgetary restrictions. Concentrated spending on one issue may strain finances in other sectors, Mr. Venugopal reasoned.

Justice Lokur, heading a three-judge Bench, said the court was trying to resolve issues plaguing the nation and expects to utilise available funds wisely.

The court was examining ways to end the over-crowding of prisons and condition of undertrial prisoners languishing in jails. It also wanted to set up a committee to look into the conditions in prisons.

Justice Lokur pointed out that the Supreme Court had facilitated collection of "over a 100 thousand Crore Rupees" and that the government was not using these funds properly.

"The government is not using funds properly. Over 30 thousand crore rupees were collected for the benefit of building and construction workers but the money is spent in buying washing machines... They don't have clothes but washing machines are bought. Laptops are bought for illiterate people. The government is not using the funds that are lying with it properly," Justice Lokur said.

Mr. Venugopal responded that the court should pass orders on an issue with an eye on the impact it would cause in other sectors.

Justice Lokur said the orders of this court focussed on issues like prison conditions, child rights, women rights. The government has been able to receive several crore of revenue from the Supreme Court's orders in cases like mining, etc.

Duty to protect

The court said it could not abandon its duty to protect the citizens' fundamental right to life and dignity. Justice Lokur said the court and the government were not adversaries.

Mr. Venugopal said the efforts of the court has been "tremendous" over the past years. The court then ordered setting up of a committee to be headed by a retired Supreme Court Judge and assisted by "two or three other officers" to look into the issues of prison conditions.

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