

123 agreement with U.S. is unacceptable to us: Advani

Special Correspondent The Hindu

Nothing in pact that prevents India from conducting further tests: Manmohan

— PHOTO: PTI/COURTESY: LOK SABHA TV

QUESTION OF SOVEREIGNTY: Leader of the Opposition L.K. Advani makes a forceful point against the India-U.S. nuclear deal during the debate in the Lok Sabha on Wednesday. He said: "Indira Gandhi and Atal Bihari Vajpayee would not have agreed to this kind of encroachment on sovereignty."

NEW DELHI: The much-awaited debate on the India-United States civilian nuclear deal took place on Wednesday in the Lok Sabha but it failed to produce a "broad national consensus" despite a spirited defence of the accord by External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee.

The entire Opposition staged a walkout, but not before Leader of the Opposition L.K. Advani declared that if the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance came to power, it would renegotiate the nuclear deal. The walkout, ahead of Mr. Mukherjee's reply, was to protest against the government's refusal to concede the NDA demand for a reply from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The Left, which lends crucial support to the United Progressive Alliance government, also remained unconvinced and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) described the nuclear deal as "surrender" to Washington.

At the end of the seven-hour debate, it managed to extract an assurance from Mr. Mukherjee that the government would come back to Parliament at every stage of the process of negotiations on the deal. However, he refused to accept the Left demand that the government accept the absence of consensus on the issue as "sense of the House" and not to proceed any further. "Unless the process is complete, where is the question of taking the sense of the House," he responded.

In his brief intervention midway through the discussion, Dr. Singh said there was nothing in the 123 Agreement that prevented India from conducting further nuclear tests, if necessary. "Detrimental"

Criticising the deal, Mr. Advani said "the 123 Agreement, as it stands, is unacceptable to the nation because it is deeply detrimental to India's vital and long-term interests."

During his hour-long response, Mr. Mukherjee said the India-specific

safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency was aimed at ensuring fuel supply and the country's right to create strategic reserves to meet any interruption in fuel supply, besides securing recognition for India's strategic programme by accepting the separation plan.

As for the Left's specific concern whether India's fast breeder reactors would be put under safeguards, the Minister's response was a categorical 'no.' The deal, according to him, would provide India a passport to enter into nuclear trade with a host of countries as well as facilitate access to technology. And, it would in no way affect India's military programme.

The discussion with the IAEA was only a "small step" in the entire process, Mr. Mukherjee said. Just as the government took Parliament into confidence after the joint statement in July 2005, the separation plan in March 2006, the Hyde Act in December 2006, and the agreed text of the 123 Agreement in August 2007, it would