

BJP, Left walk out as Pranab sticks to stand

By Our Special Correspondent

New Delhi, Dec. 5: The UPA government sat isolated in the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday as the entire House, including the Left and the BJP, walked out after external affairs minister Pranab Mukherjee refused to accept the majority opposition to the Indo-US civil nuclear energy agreement as the "sense of the House". He said that the "sense of the House" could be determined only after the process of operationalising the nuclear deal was complete.

The debate in both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha had members reminding the government that it was in the minority on the issue, and that it should accept the "sense" of Parliament as binding and not proceed with the nuclear deal. As soon as Mr Mukherjee said he was not prepared to do so, all the members from the BJP, Left, UNPA, AIADMK and others walked out to demonstrate that they did not accept the government's argument. Mr Digvijay Singh (JD-U), who was among the first on his feet, later told this newspaper that "we boycotted the reply as the minister was not prepared to listen to the House." CPI(M) general secretary Prakash Karat said on Thursday that "at every stage, despite the majority view against the deal, the government has proceeded ahead." He pointed out: "The argument that the sense of the House can be taken only after the process is completed would mean that Parliament has no say whatsoever except to have an academic debate on the issue." He said it was "imperative for the government to take into account the clear verdict of Parliament against the 123 Agreement. Any move to take the next steps to operationalise the agreement would be showing disrespect for Parliament and the essential tenets of parliamentary democracy."

Mr Pranab Mukherjee insisted that he would take the sense of the House only after the process to operationalise the nuclear deal had been completed. During his response to the mammoth 10-hour debate on the nuclear deal in the Rajya Sabha, the minister had outlined the "process" as one, the agreement between the US and India on the language of the text of the 123 Agreement that has been done; two, the India-specific safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency; three, the amendment of the Nuclear Suppliers Group guidelines; four, the ratification by the US Congress where he said the 123 Agreement along with the other two documents had to lie for 90 days. "We are still in the process, the process has yet to be completed," Mr Mukherjee said, but did not indicate any deadlines for this.

Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Jaswant Singh stood to ask for a clarification after Mr Mukherjee had completed his speech. As soon as he stood up, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh left the House and Mr Jaswant Singh was left to address his disappearing back. Mr Mukherjee explained that the Prime Minister had a prior appointment, leading Mr Jaswant Singh to wonder why Dr Singh could not have informed the House about this himself. "He has been taking the House for granted, and that disappoints us," he said.

Mr Jaswant Singh said it was important for the government to take the sense of the House, which was against the nuclear deal, into account. "Don't be in a hurry, convince the House, carry the people with you," he said, adding: "It is very clear that the a large part of the House, the majority, is not with you." Mr Jaswant Singh reminded the minister that he had spoken well of the bipartisan support the nuclear agreement enjoyed in the US Congress. "If you are lauding the bipartisan support there why are you not working for bipartisan support here?" he said.

CPI(M) MP Sitaram Yechury, who had initiated the debate, said he was not convinced by the minister's reply and "my opposition to the nuclear deal continues." He said that former US President Bill Clinton,

who had got the support of 33 nations for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, could not get it ratified by the US Senate. He said that going by this, the government should respect democracy here and drop the nuclear deal as the majority in the House did not agree. After this, Mr Mukherjee stood up to say that the sense of the House could be taken only after the process had been completed, upon which all the political parties outside the UPA walked out. A visibly angry minister was unable to proceed and sat down with a "what kind of people are they?"

In his reply, Mr Mukherjee actually admitted two of the arguments made by the members opposing the nuclear deal. He said that India had retained its right to test, but admitted that there would be consequences. This is what most of the MPs had pointed out during the debate, maintaining that India's right to test had been shackled effectively because of the stringent consequences spelt out in the Hyde Act. Congress MP Abhishek "Manu" Singhvi, in his clinical speech, had said that India had the right to test but did not need to test. He then wanted to know from the opponents of the deal how they could expect another country — in this case the United States — not to impose restrictions and accept nuclear testing, the argument being that the US could react but that could not prevent India from doing whatever it wanted to.

Mr Mukherjee also agreed that the price of nuclear energy would be high at this stage, but went on to point out that this would go down with time. The UPA government sat isolated in the Rajya Sabha as the entire House, including the Left and the BJP, walked out after Mr Mukherjee refused to accept the majority opposition to the nuclear deal. "It might appear too costly today but will not appear too costly tomorrow," he said.

Mr Yechury had initiated the debate with statistics, proving how expensive nuclear energy would be when compared to energy derived from other sources. But, said the minister, the Opposition should think of future generations who would benefit from the low costs because of "advancing technology". He reminded the House that the price of mobile phones had been high initially, but had come down over time.