

RAJYA SABHA

Thursday, the 5th May, 1988/15
- Vaisakha, 1910 (Saka)

The House met at eleven of the clock. The Deputy Chairman in the Chair.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Missing Rocket/Missiles from Jabalpur Ordnance Depot

*161. KUMARI SUSHILA TIRIA:†
SHRI KAPIL VERMA:

Will the Minister of DEFENCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether a fire broke out at the Ordnance factory Jabalpur, if so, what was the cause thereof;

(b) whether some arms and ammunitions were found missing;

(c) if so, the details thereof;

(d) whether the missiles and Rockets used by terrorists in Punjab have been stolen from the Jabalpur depot; if so, the number of rockets missing from the depot; and

(e) what is the make of the rockets being used by terrorists in Punjab?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE (SHRI SANTOSH MOHAN DEV): (a) A fire broke out on 23rd March 1988 at the Ammunition Sub Depot of the Central Ordnance Depot, Jabalpur. A Staff Court of Inquiry has been ordered to ascertain the cause of the fire.

(b) No arms and ammunition were reported missing immediately prior to the incident.

†The question was actually asked on the floor of the House by Kumari Sushila Tiria.

(c) Does not arise.

(d) There is no basis to suspect that the source of the Rockets used by terrorists in Punjab is the Jabalpur Depot.

(e) Parts of a few Russian made rockets and these of certain other rockets, whose origin is yet to be determined, are reported to have been seized from the terrorists by the Security Forces.

KUMARI SUSHILA TIRIA: Madam Deputy Chairman, a fire blast broke out on the 23rd March, 1988, in the Jabalpur Central Ordnance Depot. I would like to know from the hon. Minister whether this type of fire blast happened previously in the same depot and what precautionary measures have been taken to avoid such kinds of incidents in future. In part (b) of my question I would like to know whether the Government is thinking of taking any disciplinary action against the alleged persons or guilty persons or negligent employees and officials who are responsible for this fire and explosion in the Central Ordnance Depot which caused the fire.

SHRI SANTOSH MOHAN DEV: Madam, a court of inquiry has been instituted. They are expected to submit the report by the 15th of this month. The court of inquiry has been asked to identify the cause of the fire and the extent of the damage. It has also been asked to suggest what precautionary steps should be taken to protect such fires and find out if any individual or group of persons is involved and if so, who are those persons. Once it comes to us, then only we will be able to take further steps to protect the depots from fires or take any disciplinary action against those who are responsible. At this stage we are not in a position to say who are guilty and what the cause of the fire is.

KUMARI SUSHILA TIRIA: Madam, my second supplementary is that part

(b) of the question has been answered in the negative. But so far as the newspapers are concerned, many national dailies and important news-
rockets were stored there. Is the Minister in a position to categorically large number of cartridges which are lying on the road which some villagers had taken while they were running into the forest. Some doubts have also been expressed that the culprits had hidden a huge stock near a culvert in the village. What is the Government's reaction in this regard?

SHRI SANTOSH MOHAN DEV: Madam, we have no information as such. Any how such reports have been seen by us also and this is being inquired into by the police.

SHRI KAPIL VERMA: Madam, I do not seriously take the claim of the illegal Khalistanis that it is their doing. But I would like the Government to tell us whether they suspect any kind of sabotage. The chairman of the council of trade unions has said that about 2,000 sophisticated Russian rockets were stored there. Is the Minister in a position to categorically deny this that these rockets were not there, because some rockets of Russian origin have been used by Punjab terrorists? Secondly, what is the estimated loss due to the fire and thirdly, what was the total quantity of ammunition lost in the fire and how far it has reduced the availability to the army?

SHRI SANTOSH MOHAN DEV: Madam, as at present there is no indication to suspect that so called Khalistan terrorists are involved in it. As regards the quantum of loss, it is about Rs. 20 crores, as has been evaluated now. And about the rockets used by the terrorists, it is a fact that some rockets of Russian origin have been seized in Punjab. But it has nothing to do with the storage of arms and ammunition in the army depots.

SHRI KAPIL VERMA: What is the total loss of ammunition?

SHRI SANTOSH MOHAN DEV: Unless the enquiry is completed, it is very difficult for me to say the exact loss of ammunition, and the ammunition which has been lost is indigenously produced within the country which we would be able to replace.

SHRI SUBRAMANIAN SWAMY: My question relates to part (d) and (e) of the main question and the reply given by the Minister so far. He admits that Russian weapons have been seized by the security forces in Punjab and he does not connect it with what is there in the Jabalpur dump. I would like to know from the Minister whether he has seen a report in the Indian Post of April 24 to say that these Russian-made arms found in Punjab were really crates sent from Afghanistan to the Government of India and planted in Punjab. I would like to know the reaction of the Government to this story in the newspaper and circulated all over the world.

SHRI SANTOSH MOHAN DEV: As the hon. Member has said, it is really a story; there is no *prima facie* fact and the Government of India has already denied it.

SHRI SUBRAMANIAN SWAMY: Have you conducted an enquiry?

SHRI SANTOSH MOHAN DEV: There is no Question of enquiry; there is no truth in it.

श्रीमती बीणा वर्मा : सीओडी० के इन मेगजीनस में एक बिल्ड-इन-सेफ्टी सिस्टम होता है जो कि आग लगने पर वाटर स्प्रिंकलर को आटोमेटिकली एक्टिवेट कर देता है। उप सभापति महोदया, मैं यह जानना चाहती हूँ कि क्या यह स्प्रिंकलर ठीक तरह से काम कर रहे थे जब वहाँ आग लगी। क्या स्प्रिंकलर सिस्टम के जो पाईप होते हैं रस्टेड थे या काम करने योग्य थे क्योंकि स्प्रिंकलर के ठीक काम करने के बारे में गंभीर शंका है? दूसरा

बी पार्ट यह है कि कोर्ट आफ इन्क्वायरी डेढ़ महीने पहले सैट अप की गई थी अभी तक उसकी रिपोर्ट नहीं आई, उसमें विलम्ब के क्या कारण हैं? क्या फायर फाइटिंग इक्विपमेंट की भी जांच की गई थी? और कोर्ट आफ इन्क्वायरी के अलावा क्या किसी अन्य इन्वेस्टिगेटिव एजेंसी ने जांच की है? यदि हां, तो उस की रिपोर्ट क्या है? साथ ही इस संबंध में पुलिस की क्या रिपोर्ट है?

SHRI SANTOSH MOHAN DEV:
As I have said, we have got the fire-fighting arrangements there; we have six fire-fighting pumps and engines; they were put to operation. There is also arrangement in, particular depots to have the sprinkler system and that was also effective. Apart from that, about 13 fire tenders and pumps were called from other army depots and civil sources.

As regards the court of enquiry, we expect, the report will be available by 15th of this month. Apart from the court of enquiry, as I have said earlier, IB has also been entrusted to enquire into it because various allegations have come in various papers and from various sources. So, we are having a thorough enquiry into the whole affair.

DR. G. VIJAYA MOHAN REDDY:
It is well known that even in Defence factories, piece works are given on contract. Even services like cleaning also are given on contract. This endangers the security of these factories. Will the Government take a decision to abolish private contract system in Defence factories?

SHRI SANTOSH MOHAN DEV:
The hon. Member is confusing between a Defence factory and an army depot. The question concerns about the ordnance depot where arms and ammunition are stored. There, no contractor is employed. In this case, we have 3500 civilian workers who are on our pay roll and about 800 army officials working in the depots.

We do not allow contractors here. But in factories, yes.

श्रीमती रत्न कुमारी : महोदया, समाचार-पत्रों में छपे समाचार के अनुसार पंजाब की कुछ उग्रवादी संस्थाओं ने आग लगने की जिम्मेदारी अपने ऊपर ली है? यदि हां, तो सरकार उन उग्रवादी संस्थाओं के कथन पर क्या कार्यवाही कर रही है? दूसरे, क्या यह बात सच है कि जब आईनैंस डिपो में आग लगी तब फायर ब्रिगेड वहां दस घंटे तक नहीं पहुंची और दस घंटे बाद ही पहुंची?

SHRI SANTOSH MOHAN DEV:
Madam, as I have said, till now, we have not been able to get any information to suspect that so called Khalistani commandos are involved in this. The enquiry is going on. When the findings come, we will definitely inform the House.

As regards the presence of the officer, the officer who is in charge of the depot himself detected the fire first when he was going on a routine inspection of the depot. Therefore, the question of his arriving at the spot after four hours does not arise.

AN HON. MEMBER: Ten hours.

SHRI JASWANT SINGH: Madam, I have two clarifications to seek. One arises out of what the hon. Member said, about the news that 22 crates of ammunition, rockets etc. arrived at Delhi—Airway Bill No. 058-3035-473—from Afghanistan. They were claimed by the Government of India, which fact has not been denied by the Cabinet Secretary. How, on that basis, therefore, does the hon. Minister of State for Defence deny this fact?

Secondly, so far as the fire in the COD, Jabalpur, is concerned, the reported nature of the fire and its extent rules out the question that it

is a casual fire, that it was spontaneous because the fire itself was not untechnical. I would request the hon. Minister of State, therefore, to clarify whether he would rule out deliberate sabotage in the light of the two factors; one, the knowledge that there exists in COD, Jabalpur, a long-standing labour dispute and, secondly, that the timing of the fire was curiously coincidental with the rounds by the Commandant of COD, Jabalpur?

SHRI SANTOSH MOHAN DEV: Madam, as the enquiry is on to find out the truth, for me, as a Minister, it will be very difficult to either agree or disagree with the point made by the hon. Member. It is for the Court of Enquiry to find out what is the cause of the fire and whether any sabotage is there.

We have placed all the questions before the Court of Enquiry. They will go into the details. They will definitely examine whether there is any sabotage either by some outsiders or by somebody within the depot.

As regards his other question, I have nothing to add to my reply which I have given in response to Mr. Swamy's question. Government has issued a denial. Apart from that, it is a question which should go to the Prime Minister's Secretariat, not to me. But the information which I have...

SHRI SUBRAMANIAN SWAMY: The Prime Minister is here. He can answer.

SHRI SANTOSH MOHAN DEV: I have given the information which I have got from the Prime Minister's office and the Cabinet Secretariat and I stand by it.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Question No. 162. (Interruptions)

ठाकुर जगतपाल सिंह : यह आर्डिनेंस का मसला इम्पोर्टेंट है, मैडम... (अवधान) ...

SC/ST judges in the High Courts

*162. **SHRI AJIT P. K. JOGI:** Will the Minister of LAW AND JUSTICE be pleased to state:

(a) what percentage of judges in various High Courts of the country belong to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes categories;

(b) whether Government have recently received representations from various organisations and people's representatives in this regard;

(c) whether Government propose to alter the appointment procedure for the High Court judges in view of their almost non-existent representation on these courts; and

(d) if so, what steps are proposed to be taken to remedy the imbalance in this regard?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF LAW AND JUSTICE (SHRI HANS RAJ BHARDWAJ): (a) Information about caste or community is not asked for at the time of making appointments of Judges in High Courts. According to information received from the Registries, as on 1-11-1987, there were 6 Judges belonging to Scheduled Castes and 1 Judge belonging to Scheduled Tribes out of 392 Judges in position in various High Courts of the country.

(b) Yes, Sir. Some representations have been received.

(c) and (d) No, Sir. Appointment of Judges in High Courts are made in terms of provisions of Article 217(2) of the Constitution which do not provide for reservation in favour of any category or caste or class of persons. However, the Government have again addressed the Chief Ministers of States and Chief Justices of