

## **Will not visit India until blockade is lifted: Nepal PM**

26/01/2016 21:49 by admin

**Kathmandu:** Raising a question-mark over his visit to India next month, Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli on Tuesday said it will not be appropriate for him to visit New Delhi as long as a blockade of the Nepal-India border continues.

A now more than five-month-old anti-Constitution protest by Madhesis in the southern Nepali Terai has led to a blockading of a major portion of the 1,868-m open border that the landlocked Himalayan nation has with its southern neighbour.

Most of the 41 transit and customs points along the southern portion of this open border have been besieged by the Madhesi protestors who are demanding, among others, a redrawing of the boundaries of the provinces in Nepal as proposed in the new Constitution -- promulgated on September 20 last year; and representation in Parliament on the basis of population.

Significantly, the Nepal Terai has almost 51 percent of the country's population and yet gets only one-third of seats in Parliament.

The Madhesis also seek proportional representation in government jobs and restoration of rights granted to them in the interim constitution of 2007 which the new charter has snatched away.

An India visit by Oli, the first foreign tour by him after assuming the office, is likely to take place in late February with preparations apace, according to reports in the Nepali media.

But the leftist premier, who has assumed an ultra-nationalist posture and shown unwillingness to meet the grievances of the Madhesi protestors, has often declared his resolve not to visit New Delhi till the agitation in the Terai was over.

In an interaction with senior editors at his residence here on Tuesday, Oli expressed the hope that the blockade at key Nepal-India entry points will be lifted within a couple of days.

He also reiterated that he will not visit India until the situation in the Nepali Terai normalises.

"I believe in friendship between friends, political honesty among friends and upon my confidence... I am hopeful that the embargo at border points will be lifted," Oli declared.

Nepal is falling severely short of fuel, essential supplies, medicines and other stuff due to the prolonged blockading of the border customs points by Madhesi protestors.

India has been urging Kathmandu to reach out to the discontented sections in the Nepal Terai as soon as possible.

Unnerved by the prolonged Madhesi agitation, the ruling major-Left coalition as also the main opposition Nepali Congress last week approved two amendments to the four-month-old Constitution partly meeting the demands of the agitating Madhesis.

Also last week, the government launched an ambitious NRs.5 billion Border Area Development Programme (BADP) in the south-eastern Nepali Mahottari district.

The five-year development programme shall initially target the development of proposed province number 2 -- the heartland of the ongoing Madhesi agitation -- and will seek to create physical and social infrastructures in the region that borders southern neighbour India.

The region chosen for the programme has villages and towns bordering India. It has been lagging behind in life expectancy, literacy and per capita income values as compared to other regions of the country.

Oli told the senior editors that his government had fulfilled demands of the agitating parties. "There is no question why the embargo will not be lifted," he said.

However, the Madhesi Morcha spearheading the agitation on Monday rejected the amendments to the statute and announced a fresh agitation programme besides calling for a broader alliance among all forces in the Terai-Madhes region.

The agitating four-party alliance, at a meeting here on Monday, resolved that the stir would continue until their demands were met by the ruling elite in Kathmandu.

The Madhesi Morcha later asserted that their struggle would continue till all their demands were met in a package. The meet also demanded the setting up of a high-level judicial panel to probe the numerous instances of killings by the state in the Terai.

In its fresh programme, the Morcha has announced candlelight vigil at district headquarters on Wednesday as a tribute to those killed during the protests; regional assemblies on Saturday to inform people about the latest political developments; and interactions with professionals, intellectuals, labourers and traders on Monday next about the Morcha's agenda.

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