

Madhesis call-off 5-month long strike; end Indo-Nepal border blockade

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Kathmandu: Madhesis of Nepal, who were on a strike for nearly five-months, called it off today following the hardships faced by their country due to the blockade at the Indo-Nepal border. The prolonged protest against a new Constitution had resulted in severe shortages of fuel, medicine and other supplies for the people of Nepal.

A meeting was held between the United Democratic Madhesi Front leaders after which an official statement confirming the end of the strike was issued.

"Considering the current crisis facing the nation and the public necessity and aspirations, the ongoing protest programmes of general strike, border blockade, government office shutdown have been called off for now," said the statement.

"The agitation will continue till our demands are addressed," the statement added. The announcement to end the border blockade comes ahead of Prime Minister K P Oli's trip to India on February 19, the first overseas visit of the new Nepalese premier.

The UDMF has announced only three protest programmes including a torch rally, a lathi rally and a people's vote collection campaign in district headquarters.

Nepal's Madhesi community, largely of Indian origin, are opposed to the new Constitution that divides their ancestral homeland under the seven-province structure and have led an ongoing blockade of key border trade points with India.

The agitating community that shares strong cultural and family bonds with India is demanding demarcation of provinces, fixing of electoral constituencies on the basis of population and proportional representation, and have launched a protest for months that has claimed at least 55 lives.

The agitation by Madhesis in Terai region bordering India paralysed services in Nepal and triggered huge shortage of essential supplies, including fuel and medicines, as the protesters blocked all border trade points between the two countries.

Except the Raxaul-Birgunj border point, trade has resumed at all other posts. The Raxaul-Birgunj point was opened briefly a couple of days ago, but it was closed again. The blockade led to strain in the bilateral ties, with Kathmandu accusing New Delhi of imposing an "unofficial blockade".

However, India maintains that it has imposed no such blockade, and the restrictions are a result of security concerns as Madhesis are protesting the new Constitution in the Terai region of Nepal bordering India.

The UDMF leaders also noted that the comments made by Sadbhawana Party Chairman Rajendra Mahato, a key leader of the agitating alliance, have dealt a blow to the Madhes agitation.

"As the latest activities and comments of Sadbhawana Party Chairman Mahato have damaged the Madhes agitation, the Madhesi Morcha directs him not to be involved in such activities in the coming days," the statement said.

- (With PTI inputs)