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Indian parliament passes tough new terrorism laws

Rama Lakshmi in New Delhi

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RESPONDING to soaring public anger over security lapses after the Mumbai assault, the lower house of India's parliament has passed a string of tough anti-terrorism laws and a plan to set up a national investigative agency.

The Government debated and brought to the table two bills, the National Investigating Agency Bill and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendments Bill, which will facilitate investigation and trial of the accused in cases of terrorism.

"You have captured the mood of the nation. The nation expects parliament to pass these laws today and restore their confidence," India's new Home Minister, Palaniappan Chidambaram, told the MPs after several hours of debate.

When he presented the bills on Wednesday morning, he said he was appealing with "folded hands" for the members to pass it in a bipartisan manner. At the end of the day, he said: "For a jihadi terrorist, this is no deterrent. He comes here to die, he comes here to kill. These laws give a sense of confidence to the people that criminals will be punished. All these are punitive laws and not preventive laws."

The bills assumed urgency in India after the Mumbai rampage where 10 gunmen laid siege to India's financial capital for three days and killed more than 170 people and wounded more than 230.

Responding to the national outrage that followed the attacks, India has announced a comprehensive revamp of its security forces and strengthened coastal borders and intelligence agencies.

The left-of-centre Congress Government had earlier voted out a previous anti-terrorism measure because of its sweeping powers and potential for abuse.

But in the wake of the Mumbai attacks, the Government felt pressured by public opinion to introduce a similar law to clamp down on terrorism.

However, the parliamentary debate about the anti-terrorism law was not without disagreement.

Many MPs argued against a severe bill that would stifle the legal rights of many of the accused, which the Indian constitution guarantees. Some said existing laws are enough to address terrorism. Others said the law might be used to unfairly target India's Muslim minority of 130 million people.

The new law will increase the period of detention of suspects by the police and the judiciary from 90 to 180 days and seeks to choke the financial pipelines of groups suspected of abetting terrorism. But the law also makes the signed confession of suspects in police custody inadmissible in court, a crucial deterrent against coercive methods often used during interrogation. It also gives the courts the power to decide on bail in some cases.

The Government also proposed setting up a national agency, along the lines of the FBI, to investigate and prosecute "offences affecting the sovereignty, security and integrity" of the country.

The leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, L.K. Advani, supported the new law but also reprimanded the Congress Government for removing the earlier law.

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