

**12.04 hrs.**

**STATEMENT BY MINISTER**

**Shri Amarnathji Yatra-2004\***

Title: Regarding Shri Amarnath Yatra-2004.-laid.

MR. SPEAKER: Now, we shall take up item no. 9 – Statement by the Home Minister. The hon. Home Minister may kindly lay his Statement on the Table of the House.

THE MINISTER OF HOME AFFAIRS (SHRI SHIVRAJ V. PATIL): Sir, I beg to lay my Statement on the Table of the House.

Annual Shri Amarnathji Yatra spread over a period of one month concludes every year with the holy mace of Lord Shiva reaching the Holy Cave on Raksha Bandhan day. Accordingly, Amarnath Yatra 2004 was scheduled to begin on August 1 and conclude on Raksha Bandhan day on August 30.

The Yatra is undertaken on two routes, viz. the traditional route *via* Pahalgam and a shorter route *via* Baltal. From Pahalgam side pilgrims trek 30 Kms to reach the Holy Cave and the journey is completed in 2-3 days. From Baltal side the distance up to the Holy Cave is 15 Kms and often pilgrims complete two-way journey on the same day.

The security arrangements for the Yatra start right from Jammu from where pilgrims are sent in convoys with escorts. ROPs are in position from Jammu to Pahalgam and Jammu to Baltal. The Base Camps at Pahalgam and Baltal are to be provided adequate security protection. The entire area between Pahalgam to Holy Cave and Baltal to Holy Cave is put under a three-tier security cover. The outer cordon looks after area dominance, the middle cordon takes care of the route and approaches to the route and the inner cordon secures various camps along the Route to the Holy Cave. This involves a very elaborate security grid beginning 7-10 days in advance from the first day of the Yatra and extending to about five days after the last day of Darshan when the pilgrims reach back to Jammu.

The routes to Shri Amarnathji Cave pass through difficult terrain and are subject to extreme weather conditions. In 1996, snowfall and avalanches caused large-scale damage to life and property following which Government set up Nitish Sengupta Commission to inquire into the incidents. The Nitish Sengupta Commission recommended restricting the Yatris to 3,500 per day including 700 Yatris *via* Baltal route for 30 days' Yatra.

During the Amarnath Yatra 2000, 2001 and 2002 a number of violent incidents have taken place. Following the terrorist incidents at Pahalgam on August 1, 2000 when 21 Yatris, eight Civilians and two Police personnel were killed, a Committee headed by Lt. General J.R. Mukherjee, General Officer Commanding, 15 Corps enquired into the incident and recommended that the duration of Yatra in the present security environment and the commitment of security forces in the State should be restricted to one month. The Committee was of the opinion that when normalcy returns the duration can be increased. The Committee also recommended that the number of Yatris should be strictly controlled and limited to the capacity of administrative and security infrastructure. While Dr. Nitish Sengupta Commission recommended 2,800 Yatris for southern Pahalgam route and 700 for northern Baltal route, the present Committee recommended 3,000 and 2,000 respectively, provided adequate infrastructure are created, *i.e.*, the track is properly widened and strengthened. Till such time it would be necessary to limit the number of Yatris as per the recommendation of Dr. Sengupta Committee report.

Every since the terrorism started in the State, additional resources had to be pumped into making security and administrative arrangements for the Yatra. Security for the Yatra is strengthened by withdrawing man-power from the counter insurgency grid as also deployment of large number of officers and personnel to J&K Police en-route and at each camp. The District Administration of Anantnag and Srinagar in particular get totally involved in making arrangements for the Yatra.

The terrorist violence, which had shown a sharp increase after the Lok Sabha elections has not shown any let up even after the elections and, therefore, there is greater need for anti-terrorist operations prior to the commencement of the Yatra.

A suggestion was made by Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board and some social and political organizations to extend the period of the Yatra to two months. But in the light of the security scenario explained as above and the commitment of Security Forces the State Government did not find it feasible to extend the period of Yatra. It was, therefore, decided to commence the Yatra as per the past practice *i.e.*, one month prior to the Raksha Bandhan. However, considering the demand from the above mentioned organizations the State Government decided to extend the Yatra period by 10 days beginning from July 20. However, following a meeting between H.E. the Governor and Hon'ble Chief Minister it has been decided that the Yatra will start on July 15 with the first group of Yatris from Baltal route reaching the Holy Cave on July 16 and from the Pahalgam side on July 17.

Registration for the Yatra has started at various branches of Jammu and Kashmir Bank throughout the country. Till July 6, over 61,000 Yatris had registered themselves for undertaking the pilgrimage.

(Placed in Library, See No. LT 222/04)

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\*Laid on the Table.