

[Mr. Speaker]

that the Committee shall make a report to this House by the first day of the next Session;

that in other respects the Rules of Procedure of this House relating to Parliamentary Committees will apply with such variations and modifications as the Speaker may make; and

that this House recommends to Rajya Sabha that Rajya Sabha do joint the said Joint Committee and communicate to this House the names of members to be appointed by Rajya Sabha to the Joint Committee."

*The motion was adopted.*

#### STATEMENT RE EXPLOSION AT PATHANKOT

The Minister of Defence (Shri Krishna Menon): Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government deeply regret to have to inform the House that a tragic incident occurred at the Ordnance Rail Head Group at Pathankot on the 24th February, 1958, at 08.15 hours, resulting in considerable destruction of life and property. Six railway wagons containing ammunition and other Defence stores were on the military siding, ready for unloading. Not long after the unloading began, there was an explosion. Two of the wagons containing ammunition were completely blown off, three others are badly damaged, while the sixth wagon appears at present not to have been seriously affected. The debris, including elements and fragments of the wagons, was thrown by the ferocity of the resultant blast well over a radius of 1000 yards from the railway siding.

The explosion, which is reported to have been heard as far away as Gurdaspur, 23 miles from Pathankot, set fire to the Defence stores in the depot over a wide area. The fire raged for about three-quarters of an hour, destroying considerable quantities of stores. No lives were lost as a

result of fire. Fire parties from all Units in the station reached the spot in a few minutes and put out the fire in less than an hour with great courage and skill. Field Ambulance with necessary medical, nursing staff and blood donors of the Military Hospital also reached the spot within a few minutes of the explosion and the casualties, both Defence and civilian, were removed to the Military Hospital speedily. In the face of the constant danger of further explosions taking place, the fire fighting crew together with the personnel in the Depot and from the neighbouring Defence Units and local Civil authorities carried out rescue operations with commendable speed, courage and efficiency. The area of the Ordnance Rail Head Group, including the Army military forwarding organisation and vehicle park is now secured by civil and military guards. All civilians working in the Depot were instantly removed out of the perimeter and outside the area which is still considered unsafe.

Road and railway traffic stand suspended.

The full extent of the casualties is not yet known. As far as can be ascertained at present, 18 civilians and 8 army personnel are known to be dead. The bodies of 23 of the dead have been recovered. Three of the dead cannot be removed from the wagon where their bodies now are without risking further explosions. Eight military personnel, one civilian employee and one member of an army family received injuries. The condition of the three of the injured is serious, but they are expected to recover. 28 civilian employees are now missing. It is not known how many of these have died in the explosion. It is, however, surmised by the Army authorities that some of these who are local civilian employees may have run away to their villages and the Civil Police are making efforts to trace them.

Army Headquarters and the Defence Ministry have been in constant touch

with the Military and Civil authorities at Pathankot since the receipt of the report of the incident.

This morning, the Chief of the General Staff, the ammunition and explosives experts, Defence Ministry officials and myself reached the scene of the accident before 08.00 hours. We also went to the Military Hospital and saw the injured and the families of the dead and injured, their relatives and associates. The extent of the bereavement and of the human tragedy is considerable and harrowing.

The Defence and Civil authorities have already taken necessary steps to render assistance to the sufferers. The families of only two military personnel are at Pathankot and they have been given a grant of Rs. 600 in the aggregate. The next of kin of the remaining deceased personnel are being located and similar assistance will be given to them promptly. Prompt action will also be taken in regard to pension and other reliefs, according to their entitlements, so far as the families of the deceased military personnel are concerned.

The Deputy Commissioner, who accompanied us and who and his colleagues gave us all co-operation and with whom we discussed the position of the civilians, is taking steps to give the immediately required financial assistance to the families of the dead civilians. It is not yet possible to estimate the full extent of the loss of life and property.

It is also not possible to state at present what caused the explosion. Any attempt to do so can only be a matter of speculation or based on insufficient information, and the House would agree that it would not be proper.

The consignment of these stores by rail to the military siding in Ordnance Rail Head Group and the unloading of them by Defence and Civilian personnel is fully in accordance with rules and well-established practice and part of normal routine.

Government would like to pay their tribute to the Defence and Civilian personnel who lost their lives or suffered in the discharge of their onerous duties in the service of the country. The sympathies of the Government, and I feel sure, of this House, go out in ample measure to the men, women and children who are bereaved today and survive in the shadow of this catastrophe.

Government would like to convey their sympathies to the fellow officers and men of the Defence personnel who worked with those who are dead and injured and feel their loss deeply. Government also hope that the next of kin and the widowed and orphaned will find the strength to make readjustments imposed upon them by the irreparable loss they have suffered and the human tragedy that is theirs as a result.

A Court of Inquiry according to Army Rules has been ordered. No further particulars are available at present, nor can be given until the findings of the Court of Inquiry are received, as any such can only be based on speculation or inadequate information and will, therefore, not be fair or purposeful.

**Mr. Speaker:** Was all this ammunition manufactured in our ordnance depots?

**Shri Krishna Menon:** Yes. It is part of the normal movement of ammunition from different parts to where it has to be used. This is a rail-head inside the military area. It takes place in the normal way. As to whether in this case any one of them was defective or there was any mishandling, I do not like to speculate.

**Mr. Speaker:** If any more information becomes available, it may be communicated to the House.

**Shri Krishna Menon:** As soon as the Court of Inquiry finishes its work, I will. If anything comes to light in the meanwhile, I will communicate it. But we would not like to make any speculation.

**Mr. Speaker:** In view of the elaborate statement made by the hon. Minister who had been to the spot and examined the matter himself, and in view also of the fact that there is no more material available now except what will appear hereafter before the Court of Inquiry or as a result of their inquiry, I do not think any useful purpose will be served by giving my consent to the adjournment motions. The adjournment motions are all disallowed.

**Shri S. M. Banerjee (Kanpur):** Any further information which the hon. Minister receives may kindly be communicated to the House.

**Mr. Speaker:** He said so already.

**Shri Krishna Menon:** There is no desire on our part to withhold information. Further information must be

in regard to the causes and allocation of responsibility, and we have to be extremely careful in this matter.

**Shri V. P. Nayar (Quilon):** What about the number of dead?

**Mr. Speaker:** Whenever any thing of importance comes to light, he will readily communicate to the House.

**Shri Krishna Menon:** Yes, Sir.

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#### BUSINESS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

##### NINETEENTH REPORT

**Sardar Hukam Singh (Bhatinda):** I beg to present the Nineteenth Report of the Business Advisory Committee.

17.14 hrs.

*The Lok Sabha then adjourned till Eleven of the Clock on Wednesday, February 26, 1958.*