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Ease of justice as vital as ease of doing business: PM pushes for undertrials' speedy release

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NEW DELHI: Emphasising the need to reach out to the weakest sections of society and provide them access to justice, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday expressed concern over undertrial prisoners languishing in jail for want of legal advice and urged the judiciary to speed up the process of their release as India prepares to celebrate 75 years of Independence.

"There are many undertrial prisoners languishing in jails and are awaiting legal aid. Our district legal services authorities can take up the responsibility of providing legal assistance to them. I request all the district judges, who are chairmen of the district-level undertrial review committees, to expedite the release of undertrial prisoners," the PM said while addressing the inaugural session of the first All India District Legal

Services Authorities meet.

Modi said ease of justice is equally important as ease of living and ease of doing business in the country and appealed to the judiciary to make use of technology in the justice delivery system, especially as India is at the centre of a digital revolution. He credited the judiciary for embracing technology by holding courts through videoconferencing during the pandemic, which has now become part of the system.

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He appreciated the effort of the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), which had started a campaign to provide legal aid to prisoners, and asked the Bar Council of India and lawyers to be involved in it.

The Supreme Court has spoken on several occasions on the need to be sensitive towards the humanitarian issue of undertrial prisoners, he said. The apex court in its various orders has held judges should take liberal approach in granting bail and even ruled that if the undertrial has spent half of the sentence which he could have been awarded after conviction, he should be released on bail.

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"This time is the time of Azadi Ka Amrit Kaal. This is the time to make resolutions which will take the country to new heights in the next 25 years. Ease of justice is equally important as ease of doing business and the ease of living in this Amrit Yatra of the country," he told the conference, which was also attended by Chief Justice of India N V Ramana.

Echoing the PM's views, Justice Ramana said technology has emerged as a great enabler and urged the judges, particularly lower judiciary, to use modern technological tools to enhance the pace of justice delivery. "The reality is that, today, only a small percentage of our population can approach the justice delivery system when in need. Majority of the people suffer in silence, lacking awareness and necessary means ... Access to justice is a tool for social emancipation," he said.

Ramana said that "camouflaging" the pressing concerns of the judiciary would cripple the justice delivery system and discussions are necessary to serve people better, PTI reported.

"Wherever I go, I always attempt to project the achievements of the Indian judiciary in winning the trust and faith of the people. But if we intend to serve the people better, we need to flag the issues which hinder our functioning.

Law minister Kiren Rijiju appealed to the judges of family courts to decide the cases expeditiously and said it is worrisome that more than 11 lakh cases are pending in these courts. He said it is the children who ultimately suffer in family disputes.