

Wrestlers Protest: Ministry declares WFI's May 7 elections null and void; directs IOA to form ad-hoc committee to conduct electoral process within 45 days

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NEW DELHI: Declaring the Wrestling Federation of India's (WFI) proposed elections on May 7 as "null and void", the union sports ministry on Monday requested the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) to form a transitory or ad-hoc committee to run the day-to-day affairs of the WFI and to conduct elections to its new executive committee within 45 days of the formation of such interim body. The committee will also select wrestlers for international tournaments in the interim period.

The ministry's latest overture could be seen as a move to pacify the agitating wrestlers, who have resumed their sit-in protest at Jantar Mantar after a gap of three months, demanding the immediate arrest of WFI president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh on

charges of sexual harassment. The wrestlers present at the protest site include Bajrang Punia, Sakshi Malik, Vinesh Phogat, Sangeeta Phogat, Satyawart Kadian, Somveer Rathi and Jitender Kinha, among others.

"Since wrestling is an Olympic sport and WFI is an affiliate member of the IOA and taking note of the current situation of administrative void in WFI, it becomes incumbent on the part of the IOA to make suitable interim arrangements for managing WFI so that sportspersons of wrestling discipline do not suffer in any manner," read a ministry letter issued on Monday.

"In light of the aforementioned, it is requested that a transitory or ad-hoc committee may be constituted by the IOA to conduct the election of the executive committee of the WFI within 45 days of its formation and, to manage the affairs of the WFI, including the selection of athletes and making of entries for the participation of sportspersons in international events, for the interim period till the newly-elected executive committee takes charge," the letter added.

The wrestlers, including Bajrang, Vinesh and Sakshi, have moved the Supreme Court seeking registration of FIR against Singh over sexual harassment charges. It's been learnt that Delhi police has sought the report of the M C Mary-Kom led six-member oversight committee from the ministry to probe the allegations. According to sources, a total of seven complaints, including one from a minor wrestler, have been received by police against the WFI chief. A high-ranking official from the Sports Authority of India (SAI) will be meeting the wrestlers at the protest site on Monday evening to broker a peace deal and to convince them to call off their protest. However, it's been learnt that the wrestlers aren't happy with the ministry's latest directive and with the formation of yet another committee.

The wrestlers had trust issues with some common members, who were part of both the government-appointed oversight committee and the IOA and had alleged they were working to protect Singh. The wrestlers fear that the fresh transitory or ad-hoc committee of the IOA would have members with affiliation to a particular political party, which Singh also belongs to, and would look to shield him.

But, it's also a fact that Singh has completed his three terms of four-year each as the federation president and can't run for another stint as per the provisions of the national sports code of India, 2011. Singh had been planning to put his younger son, Karan Bhushan Singh - a senior vice-president in the current WFI executive committee - at the helm and ensure his elevation as the WFI chief during the upcoming elections.

The protesting wrestlers had filed a complaint at the Connaught Place police station on Friday, stating seven female wrestlers, including one minor, were molested, tortured and exploited by Singh in his capacity as WFI president. The wrestlers had refused to reveal the names. The ministry had, on January 23, appointed an oversight

committee for the WFI after allegations were made by certain prominent wrestlers against Singh, federation officials and some coaches for sexual harassment, as also regarding financial mismanagement and arbitrariness in the functioning of the federation. The committee had submitted its report on April 5 to the ministry, which is currently examining its contents. However, preliminary scrutiny of the report has resulted in the following major findings:

"Absence of a duly constituted internal complaints committee (ICC) under the prevention of sexual harassment act 2013 and lack of an adequate mechanism for awareness building among sportspersons, for grievance redressal; need for more transparency and consultation between the federation and stakeholders, including the sportspersons; and need for effective communication between the federation and the sportspersons.". After the submission of the report, the oversight committee has ceased to exist.