

Veteran Indian activist arrested ahead of mass fast
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NEW DELHI, Aug 16 — Indian police arrested a veteran social activist today, just hours before he was due to begin a fast to the death to demand tough laws against corruption in a campaign that has rattled the under-fire government.

The 74-year-old Anna Hazare, dressed in his trademark plain white shirt, white cap and spectacles in the style of independence leader Mahatma Gandhi, was driven away in a white car by plainclothes police, waving to hundreds of supporters who had gathered outside his home.

A police spokesman said Hazare and four others had been placed under "preventive arrest" to ensure they did not carry out a threat to protest in Delhi. No charges have yet been filed.

Hazare has become a serious challenge to the authority of the Congress party-led government in its second term as it reels from a string of corruption scandals and a perception that it is out of touch with millions of Indians hit by high food inflation.

"The second freedom struggle has started ... This is a fight for change. Unless there is change, there is no freedom, there is no actual democracy, there is no true republic, there is no true people's rule," Hazare said in a message broadcast on YouTube.

"The protests should not stop. The time has come for no jail in the country to have a free space."

Both houses of parliament were adjourned after the opposition protested at the arrests of Hazare and key aides, which appeared to signal a hardening of the beleaguered prime minister's stance towards anti-government protests.

The scandals, including a telecoms bribery scam that may have cost the government \$39 billion (RM116 billion), has smothered Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's reform agenda, dented investor confidence and distracted parliament just as the US\$1.6 trillion economy is being hit by inflation and higher interest rates.

A police spokesman said 250-300 of Hazare supporters were also detained today trying to carry out the anti-graft protest.

Police denied Hazare permission yesterday to fast near a cricket stadium because he had refused to end his fast in three days and ensure no more than 5,000 people took part.

Local media said police took Hazare into preventative custody to stop a breakdown in law and order in New Delhi as tens of thousands of followers were due to take part in the fast.

But in a country where the memory of Gandhi's independence battles against the British with fasts and peaceful protests is embedded in the national consciousness, the crackdown shocked many Indians.

Opposition figures likened the crackdown to the 1975 "Emergency" when then-prime minister Indira Gandhi arrested thousands of opposition members to stay in power.

"The government does not know how to deal with opposition in parliament, and civil society

outside parliament," BJP spokesperson Nirmala Sitharaman told CNN IBN television.

A HARDENING STANCE

Singh and his ruling Congress party have hardened their stance against Hazare in recent days, fearing that these protests could spiral.

"When you have a crowd of 10,000 people, can anyone guarantee there will be no disruption? The police are doing their duty. We should allow them to do it," Information and Broadcasting Minister Ambika Soni told CNN-IBN television.

The prime minister used his Independence Day speech on Monday to criticise Hazare, and Congress spokesman Manish Tewari said Hazare was surrounded by "armchair fascists, overground Maoists, closet anarchists".

It is unclear whether the tactics will backfire and spark further protests. They could also help the image of a prime minister criticised as weak and indecisive. A previous crackdown this year on a fasting yoga guru managed to break up his anti-corruption protests successfully.

Hazare became the unlikely thorn in the side of the Congress-led coalition when he first went on a hunger strike in April to successfully win concessions from the government.

Tapping into a groundswell of discontent over corruption scandals in Singh's government, Hazare lobbied for a parliamentary bill creating a special ombudsman to bring crooked politicians, bureaucrats and judges to book.

Hazare called off that fast after the government promised to introduce the bill into parliament. The legislation was presented in early August, but activists slammed the draft version as toothless, prompting Hazare to renew his campaign. — Reuters

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