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If wishes were horses for bureaucracy!

ISLAMABAD: The country's top bureaucracy have discussed the recent interaction between Army Chief and business leaders to save the businessmen from NAB's excesses, and wished for a similar solution to secure the civil servants from harassment and humiliation of the National Accountability Bureau.

Informed sources said in the recent Secretaries Committee meeting, the federal secretaries once again discussed the issue of NAB and its harassment. During the discussion, a source said, a reference was made to the recent meeting between Army Chief and the top businessmen leading to setting up a committee to save the business community from the Bureau's harassment. A senior bureaucrat told The News that the bureaucracy could not seek a meeting with the Army Chief as the business community did but it desperately seeks the introduction of businessmen like mechanism to ensure that the civil servants are not haunted and harassed. The officer lamented that despite realisation by the government that bureaucracy could not work in such an environment nothing has been done to correct the situation. As an outcome of the Army Chief meeting with business leaders, the NAB recently formed six-member committee to address the reservations of business community. The committee includes Vice President SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry Iftikhar Ali Malik, President Pakistan Federation of Chamber and Industry Daro Khan Achakzai, former President Bank Al-Falah Atif Bajwa, President Lahore Chamber and Industry Anjum Nisar, Chairman Millat Tractors Sikandar Mustafa Khan and former chief of the Citizens-Police Liaison Committee, Karachi, Jamil Yousuf.

To the disappointment of the bureaucracy, no step has been taken by the government to change their working conditions, whose key members are called for questioning and even arrested by NAB on the latter's whims and wishes and without any solid grounds. The sources said repeatedly the issue has been raised with the government through different channels, yet it remains unresolved. The Secretaries Committee in March this year had formally registered serious concerns against NAB for demoralising and demotivating the government servants, and decided to take up the matter with the cabinet. The minutes of the Secretaries Committee meeting, held on 20th of March, 2019, showed top bureaucracy's serious concerns against the NAB operations. The committee decided to take up the issue with the government, which was already considering to amend the NAB law to check Bureau's alleged excesses but the required amendments have not been made as yet.

The minutes show the committee to have discussed "National Accountability Bureau and Bureaucracy" as an additional agenda item. On this particular issue the official document says: "The committee took this additional agenda item on the desire of all the members. It was pointed out by the members that the handling of cases of investigation by NAB was uncalled for on many counts. The interrogation and investigation process is quite humiliating for the government officers. It was noted that this has created a sense of demoralisation and demotivation in the civil bureaucracy and must be looked into to address these issues." On the basis of the discussion, the minutes had conveyed the following decision taken by the

Secretaries Committee on the issue: “It was decided that all members may convey their concerns to the secretary Establishment Division for firming up concrete proposals for the consideration of federal cabinet.”

Informed sources said the NAB issue was once again included in the agenda of the last meeting of the Secretaries Committee. It is not yet clear if the minutes of the last meeting were approved. The sources said the fact that the issue was again discussed reflects the frustration of the bureaucracy. Sensitive about the bureaucracy’s complaints, PM’s Adviser on Civil Service Reforms Dr Ishrat Husain has pleaded several times in the cabinet meeting for amending the NAB law to check its power to arrest members of the bureaucracy. Interestingly Prime Minister Imran Khan had also complained in the public that the bureaucracy is not signing the files because of NAB’s fears which is creating problems for the government. But the bureaucrats are of the view that the prime minister needs to understand that the bureaucracy will not sign the files when it has fears that for any decision and without any evidence of corruption they could be summoned, probed and arrested by the NAB. It is argued that a civil servant loses confidence when in front of the entire bureaucracy, NAB even does not hesitate to summon Prime Minister Imran Khan’s two key bureaucratic aides- Principal Secretary Azam Khan and Secretary Establishment Dr Ejaz Munir. They added that reputed serving and retired bureaucrats are arrested and jailed for months and years without any proof of corruption against them.

In this situation, how could the bureaucracy work in a normal fashion,” a senior officer said and added the NAB lacks the basic understanding of bureaucratic working and mostly frames flawed cases. Owing to the situation, the Secretaries Committee is repeatedly focusing on this issue of NAB’s harassment. However, no corrective measure has been taken as yet.

Months ago, the NAB chairman had also attended a meeting of the Secretaries Committee and assured the top civil servants that in future the Bureau would not summon federal secretaries and additional secretaries for routine inquiries and investigations. The NAB chairman had assured them that instead of summoning the federal secretaries and additional secretaries, the Bureau’s official would visit them for answers to questions concerning any issue under the NAB’s probe. However, the bureaucracy feels that the things have not improved despite chairman’s assurances.