

HC judges shortage goes up from 443 to 470 in seven months

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New Delhi: The 24 high courts in the country are short of 470 judges, the latest data shows even as the executive and judiciary continue to have differences over key clauses of a document which will guide future appointments to the higher judiciary.

At the beginning of the year, the shortage was of 443 judges, while in the later part of 2015 it was 392, data available with the Law Ministry states.

As on July 1, the high courts were facing a shortage of 470 judges, with the Allahabad High Court having the maximum vacancies at 82. The Punjab and Haryana High Court is short of 39 judges, followed by Madras (37), Andhra Pradesh/Telangana (36) and Karnataka (35).

The high courts of Allahabad, Andhra Pradesh/Telangana, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Patna, Punjab and Haryana and Rajasthan are also functioning with acting chief justices.

Parliament had enacted the National Judicial Appointments Commission Act to do away with the over two-decade old collegium system where judges appoint judges. The law was struck down by the apex court on October 16, last year.

A Supreme Court bench, while deciding on ways to make the collegium system more transparent, had asked the Centre to redraft the Memorandum of Procedure (MoP) in consultation with the states.

The MoP is a document which guides the appointment of judges to the Supreme Court and the 24 high courts. At present, there are two MoPs, one for the apex court and the other for the high courts.

The government had sent the MoP to the SC collegium in March. The CJI had returned the document in May raising objections on the various clauses. Last week, then Law Minister D V Sadananda Gowda had met Chief Justice of India T S Thakur to iron out differences but sticking points remain.

Ravi Shankar Prasad, who on Wednesday took over as the Law Minister, said he will strive to find a "common ground" between the government and the judiciary on the issue of appointment of judges to the Supreme Court and the high courts.