



*JPNN/New Delhi /Feb 23, 2015/In a surprise move, Congress Vice President Rahul Gandhi has gone on a sabbatical "for a few weeks" following the party's whitewash in the Delhi Assembly elections on top of a string of electoral losses, setting tongues wagging about his future plans. Rahul has been "granted leave of absence for a few weeks after which he will return and resume his active participation in the affairs of the Congress party", party sources said. They said he has "requested Congress President Sonia Gandhi for some time to reflect on recent events and future course of the party". There was no official word on what Rahul plans to do or where he was at the moment as speculation raged whether it could be a precursor to his keeping away from politics.*

*A member of the Lok Sabha from Amethi, he gave a miss to Parliament which commenced its budget session today with the President's address to a joint sitting of both the Houses. Asked about the sabbatical given to Rahul, Congress President Sonia Gandhi said he has been "given a few weeks. He needs some time." "Well, the reason is what you have been told," she said in reply to a question whether he has been given time to reflect on recent events and future course of the party as has been told to the media. While the ruling BJP and Shiv Sena took jibes at Rahul and Congress revelling in the party's discomfiture, Congress leaders expressed the hope that a break would do him good and that they would continue to look for guidance from Sonia and Rahul. Party sources said Rahul believes that the direction that the party adopts at the upcoming AICC session will be of crucial importance for its future and he wishes to prepare for it.*

*Congress had had a disastrous year starting with the rout in the Lok Sabha elections last May which continued in the Assembly elections in various states including Delhi recently. The debacle in Delhi, where Congress failed to get even one seat in the 70-member House, was all the more humiliating as the party had ruled the state for 15 years till December 2013. The AICC*

session is expected in early April and media reports have suggested that Rahul could be made the party chief on that occasion. Reacting to the development, Union minister and BJP leader Prakash Javadekar said, "If somebody wants to go on leave, he can go. But the people of the country have sent Congress on a long leave. This is definite." Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs Rajiv Pratap Rudy said it shows his seriousness at a time the budget session of Parliament was beginning and raises questions over his political inclination. Shiv Sena's Sanjay Raut took a dig at Rahul, saying at a time when the issue of land acquisition has come to the fore in Parliament, he has gone to retrieve the "lost land" of the Congress party.

Congress ally NCP also took a jibe with its leader Praful Patel saying that all, especially leaders, should take Parliament very seriously to voice the needs of the people. Congress leader Sandeep Dikshit said he did not think Rahul going on leave is related to Delhi elections. "I suppose it's a time to reflect and think. I think Mr Gandhi must be wanting time for that. I feel glad he has applied and officially told people that he would not be available for a while." Dikshit said Rahul must be given that space as he genuinely wants to think and reflect on issues. Leader of Congress in Lok Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge and another leader Veerappa Moily said party would continue to take guidance from Sonia and Rahul. Another party MP Ashwini Kumar said whatever the BJP's interpretation, it's a plain and simple case of a member seeking leave as per procedures of the House to be absent for a while. Agency