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## Reach out to victims, says CJI

### - 'Volunteers must help'

Our Legal Correspondent



J.S. Khehar

**New Delhi, March 18:** Chief Justice of India J.S. Khehar today called for reaching out to victims of rapes and acid attacks as well as families that have lost their sole breadwinners to criminal acts as he wondered why such victims could not be compensated adequately.

The country's topmost judge said that while "no accused should be unrepresented" after their arrest, the rights of the victims should also be safeguarded.

"Ours is a strange country - the bigger the criminal, the bigger the outreach," the CJI said, adding that he had "not seen an era before" when a "convict or terrorist" had been denied access to justice, right up to the Supreme Court.

But "what about the victim", he said. "I wondered over the years, what about families which have lost their sole breadwinners? I have wondered, what about that acid victim whose face is disfigured and cannot survive in society?"

"I think about rape victims and their lives," he said. "I wonder why we don't reach out to them?"

The CJI was addressing the 15th all-India meet of the state legal services authorities, jointly organised by the National Legal Services Authority (Nalsa) and the Delhi State Legal Services Authority.

Nalsa and the various state legal services authorities, created under an act of Parliament, are entrusted with the task of providing free legal aid to the poor, apart from conducting Lok Adalat camps for settling cases out of court.

The Chief Justice, as Nalsa patron-in-chief, appealed to the legal fraternity to reach out to all such victims and help in whatever way possible to make 2017 the "year of the victims".

The judge pointed out that while Section 357 of the Criminal Procedure Code empowered courts to impose fines on a convict, besides awarding jail terms, Section 357A provided for payment of compensation to victims from the state's fund.

He said many people were not aware of their legal rights and urged the 75,000-odd paralegal volunteers under Nalsa and the state legal services authorities to fan out across the country and spread the message among victims of

criminal violence that they were entitled to state compensation.

Union minister of state for law and justice P.P. Chaudhary suggested that the Advocates Act, 1961, could be amended to make it mandatory for all lawyers to take up a minimum of 10 per cent free legal aid cases. The number of free legal aid cases taken up by advocates can also form the basis for their elevation to high courts whenever the occasion arises, the minister added.

Chaudhary said 75 per cent of cases in the US were settled at the pre-litigation stage through out-of-court settlements, which meant regular courts were not clogged, unlike the situation in India.

Justice Dipak Misra, the Supreme Court's second senior-most judge who is also the executive chairperson of Nalsa, said legal aid was not charity and efforts must be adopted to make free legal services and Lok Adalats a more successful concept.

He quoted figures to say that about 6.41 lakh pending cases, related to matrimonial, cheque-bounce, electricity and labour disputes among other cases, were settled amicably at countrywide Lok Adalat camps held on February 11. Around 11 lakh people had benefited, he added.