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NEET, JEE: MHA hints at rethink on dates

But Education Ministry holds firm

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Facing escalating demands from political leaders and student organisations to push back the JEE-NEET exams due to COVID-19 fears, a Home Ministry official indicated that reconsideration was on the cards. However, his Education Ministry colleague denied that a rethink was under way.

"As of now, the exam dates stand as it is. But the letters by Chief Ministers and other political leaders cannot be ignored," the Home Ministry official said on background.

"As far as I know, there is no rethink," Higher Education Secretary Amit Khare told *The Hindu*.

Last week, the Supreme Court dismissed a petition from students seeking postponement of the examina-

tions scheduled for September. Following the August 18 order, the National Testing Agency announced the schedule for the exams with JEE-Main to be held from September 1-6, JEE-Advanced on September 27; and NEET-UG on September 13.

A senior government official said the Home Ministry gave the green signal to conduct the exams on the insistence of the Education Ministry.

The official said no decision had been taken to reschedule the exams, but letters by several political leaders were being studied.

The Home Ministry's clearance is required after the Disaster Management Act, 2005, was invoked for the first time in the country in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in March.

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Anxious students opposed to holding the examinations have not only received support from political parties, but also from global youth icon and climate activist Greta Thunberg.

"It's deeply unfair that students of India are asked to sit national exams during the COVID-19 pandemic and while millions have also been impacted by the extreme floods. I stand with their call to #PostponeJEE-NEETinCOVID," Ms. Thunberg tweeted on Tuesday.

CMs against exams
On Tuesday, Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik wrote to Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank to postpone the JEE (Main) and NEET examination scheduled to be held in the first fortnight of September to ensure the safety and security of the students.

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He said in view of the prevailing pandemic situation in the country, it would be "highly unsafe and perilous for the students to visit the test centres physically."

Mr Patnaik said though more than 50,000 students were appearing for NEET and around 40,000 students were to appear for JEE (Mains) in the State, only seven townships had examination centres.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee also wrote a letter – her second in two days – to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, calling for a postponement of the exams to protect the students from grave health risk. She requested the Prime Minister to appeal the Supreme Court to review its verdict to hold the exams in September.