

Govt. to cut LPG, kerosene prices

Oppn. will be in attack mode during winter session of Parliament

The Times of India News Service
and PTI

NEW DELHI: Prices of cooking gas and kerosene are to be reduced by Rs 10 and Re 1 respectively, according to an official announcement issued on Sunday.

The decision to partially rollback prices of cooking gas and kerosene was taken at the meeting of the coordination committee of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

NDA convener George Fernandes told newsmen after the meeting that minister for petroleum and natural gas Ram Naik would make an announcement in this regard on Tuesday.

He said the date from which the new prices would take effect would be disclosed by the minister.

The rollback decision comes following persistent demand from the Trinamul Congress, later supported by several other allies.

The opposition has been clamouring for a full rollback and had given notice for taking up the issue during the winter session of Parliament, beginning on Monday.

Mr Fernandes said that today's decision would involve an additional burden of Rs 139 crore per month on the oil pool deficit.

Interestingly, the Congress, the Communist parties and other main opposition parties appear to have agreed on a coordinated stand against the government policy and plans in the month-long winter session of parliament.

If the statements of Congress president Sonia Gandhi are any indication, the principal opposition party will raise disinvestment in public sector undertakings in a big way.

Ms Sonia Gandhi has already written to minister for disinvestment Arun Shourie about her party's unhappiness over the procedure being adopted for selling the PSUs.

The opposition parties have charted a long list of issues on which they want to confront the government. While disinvestment of PSUs is one hot issue, the proposed dilution of government equity in banks and 'saffronisation' of education are the other two.

The government is aware of the opposition move and plans to take away some of the heat by proposing to refer the bank equity-dilution bill to a house committee.

The opposition parties will also press for the resignations of L.K. Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi and Uma Bharati from the Union cabinet as they are facing trial in the Ayodhya demolition case.

Besides, the way the government is handling the national security council, the growing terrorism in Assam, the situation in Kashmir and the conduct of foreign policy are other major points of the opposition attack. The Congress is also likely to seek a debate on the government's nuclear policy.

Among the pending government business is the controversial bill to reserve a third of all seats for women is one of the pending ones, but there has been no move among the political parties to move on it, nor has the government taken any initiative on it. Nor does the issue seem to have figured in the first lot of subjects planned to be raised by the opposition.

A meeting on opposition coordination was held on Sunday at CPM leader Somnath Chatterjee's house.

It was attended, among others, by Madhavrao Scindia from the Congress, Janeshwar Mishra (Samajwadi) and Raghuvansh Prasad (RJD), besides Left parties' representatives.

Lok Sabha speaker G.M.C. Balayogi also held his pre-session meeting with floor leaders of all parties to decide time allocation for diverse subjects, and also to ensure harmonious and effective functioning of the house. The meeting agreed to have at least two call-attention motions each week.

The meeting also devoted quite some time to discuss maintenance of decorum, with everyone making the customary promises in this regard.

Mr Balayogi said he was keen on keeping the house business within the regularly scheduled hours, avoiding extensions of time. Which isn't possible unless the debates proceed without disruption.

THE TIMES OF INDIA

20 NOV 2011

Cryptic Mamata keeps govt on tenterhooks

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 1 OCTOBER

THE GOVERNMENT was hopeful that ally Mamata Banerjee will reverse her decision to withdraw support to the ruling NDA, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said on Sunday, even as the Trinamul Congress chief continued to play her cards close to her chest despite attempts by PM's emissary George Fernandes to prevail upon her.

Speaking at the BJP national executive meeting here, Mr Vajpayee said: "We hope the Trinamul Congress' support will continue." Contesting Ms Banerjee charge that the government had not consulted the allies before effecting the price hike for petroleum products, Mr Vajpayee held: "She was very much present at the NDA meeting where the issue was discussed and though she did express some reservation, there was consensus among the allies that the hike had to come."

Meanwhile, a section of the Congress party leaders chose to fish in the troubled waters of the NDA by urging Ms Banerjee to lead a platform of secular parties in a battle against the CPI(M) in West Bengal.

While the PM's emissaries engaged Ms Banerjee in a discussion to resolve the problem without exacerbating it, BJP MP from the state and minister of state for communications Tapan Sikdar charged the Trinamul leader with hyping up a "non-issue."

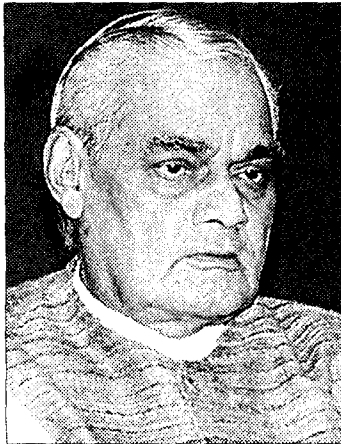
That the Trinamul chief was set to extract the most political mileage from her decision to withdraw support over the oil price hike issue despite efforts by the PM to dissuade her, however, became clear when she told reporters after her meeting with Mr Fernandes and PMO official Mr Sudheendra Kulkarni, both of whom flew to Calcutta by a special IAF plane on Saturday night. Discussions with Ms Banerjee immediately after the announcement

that she had expressed the Trinamul's viewpoint to the PM's emissaries.

"If people's interests are hurt, we are also hurt. Our protest is in the interest of the people. We can take any decision in the interest of the people," she asserted.

On his part, Mr Fernandes also remained tight-lipped on what transpired at the meeting with Ms Banerjee and her party colleague and MoS for external affairs, Mr Ajit Panja who also resigned from the Centre along with her on Saturday. "I will apprise the Prime Minister on the outcome of the talks," he said, adding "Mamata is not a problem for me."

It is being speculated that a second trip by the duo to Calcutta may be called for after consultations with the PM over the demands put forth by Ms Banerjee at the hour and half long meeting on Sunday morning. Trinamul chief whip S u d i p Bandopadhyaya was also present.



Vajpayee: Persuasive

Ms Banerjee decision to withdraw support, despite the ostensible oil price hike issue, is perceived as having been prompted by pique over the Centre's inability to act against the ruling Left Front government in West Bengal.

Ms Banerjee's persistent demand for imposition of President's Rule in the state using Article 356, however, is viewed by the government as both difficult constitutionally and as being advantageous to the CPI(M) led front politically in the run-up to the assembly elections next year.

Additionally, the Trinamul chief is understood to be miffed at the PM's decision to take aboard his council of ministers, the second MP of his own party from West Bengal, sidelining her party which has a strength of nine MPs.

In the face of this, central minister from the BJP Mr Tapan Sikdar criticised Ms Banerjee sharply in an interview to a TV channel.

Bye George, says Mamata

Our Calcutta Bureau
CALCUTTA 1 OCTOBER

THE PRIME Minister, Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee's special emissary George Fernandes on Sunday went back to Delhi crestfallen after failing to dissuade railway minister Mamata Banerjee from resigning from the Union Cabinet.

In another development, senior Congress leader Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi renewed his party's interest to form a third front (popularly called Mahajot) with Mamata's party if the firebrand Trinamul Congress supremo disassociates herself from BJP.

Speaking to reporters on Sunday, railway minister Mamata Banerjee said: "The question of my withdrawing the resignation does not arise at all. A decision is a decision and I always take decision to stick to it." She said Mr Fernandes had urged her to withdraw her resignation "but I conveyed my party's sentiment which is also the sentiment of common people to the Prime Minister through him."

Defence minister George Fernandes, however, was very optimistic about the success of his mission. "Mamata is not a problem for me", Mr Fernandes told reporters as he emerged from the crucial meeting with Ms Banerjee early this morning.

Buoyed by the possibility of a TMC-BJP break-up, the state Congress whose mass base in the state is on the wane, has come forward with a fresh tie-up proposal with TMC.

"If the distance between the BJP and the Trinomul Congress further widens in the context of the present impasse created by Ms Banerjee's decision to quit the Vajpayee cabinet, there is a possibility of a secular democratic front coming into being,"



DEFIANT: Mamata Banerjee talking to reporters in Calcutta on Sunday. — AP

Mr Dasmunshi told reporters.

Dasmunshi also said he will have "no problem in accepting Mamata Banerjee's leadership" in such a front despite being senior to her in politics. Dasmunshi's comments were crucial in the context of West Bengal going to assembly polls early next year.

Meanwhile, Mr Tapan Sikdar, the BJP minister from the state said that Ms Banerjee's move will only strengthen the ruling party and throw a spanner on the prospects of the emergence of an anti-Left force in the state.

The Economic Time.

- 2 OCT 2000

Mamata likely to withdraw resignation

Our Calcutta Bureau
CALCUTTA 3 OCTOBER

THE IMPASSE over the resignations of Ms Mamata Banerjee and Mr Ajit Panja seemed to have come to an end following Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's assurance of a partial roll back in LPG, kerosene and diesel prices.

After two rounds of prolonged meeting with Mr Vajpayee's spin doctor Sudheendra Kulkarni on Tuesday evening, Ms Banerjee gave broad hints that she might withdraw her resignation if the Cabinet meeting slated for October 6 ratified the decision for partial roll back.

Earlier, Ms Banerjee and Mr Panja, while putting in their papers, had given a three-day ultimatum to the Vajpayee government. The deadline ended on Tuesday.

Soon after her second round

of meeting with Mr Kulkarni at her South Calcutta residence, Mamata told newsmen that Mr Vajpayee had assured that "price increase of LPG, diesel and kerosene will be reduced at the Cabinet meeting convened on October 6."

"I thank the Prime Minister for his intervention but we will have to wait till then for formal announcement of price reduction. We will take a decision only after the Cabinet meeting," Ms Banerjee said.

Asked more specifically if her remark on Tuesday meant that the imbroglio had come to an end, she said: "Wait till the 6th."

However, one of Ms Banerjee's closest aides and Trinamul Congress MP, Sudip Bandopadhyay said: "What our leader said is amply clear. Only a formality is left and that will be done on the 6th."

The Economic Times

4 OCT 2000

On a sticky wicket, Mamata prepares for showdown

By Ambikanand Sahay
The Times of India News Service

NEW DELHI: If the signals emanating from the Kalighat residence of Mamata Banerjee in Calcutta are any indication, the Trinamul Congress is now preparing to break away from the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

All the leaders of Ms Banerjee's party have suddenly become tight-lipped even as her followers down the line are beginning to flex their muscles for a showdown. Reporters who had camped at Ms Banerjee's house all of Thursday could not elicit a single statement from anyone, except for a one-liner from Sudip Bandhopadhyaya, "We will only talk to the press on Friday."

It's more or less clear that the maverick 'Mamatadi' did not expect a "sudden display of political courage" by the Vajpayee government's political managers who had ensured that any decision on a rollback of petro product prices was deferred until the Prime Minister's return to Delhi from his knee surgery in Mumbai. In fact, Ms Banerjee did not seem to have a clue as to what had been happening between Hyderabad and New Delhi behind the scenes. No one

told her that the man she was counting on the most, Chandrababu Naidu, had assured the Prime Minister's political managers that the Telugu Desam would not precipitate a crisis.

Other constituents of the NDA, including the DMK, the Akali Dal and the Biju Janata Dal, agreed with the view that "you just can't go on exerting pressure on the

government like this again and again". All of them stand to lose if the edifice of the NDA crumbles at this point of time. The moment the government's political managers gauged this sentiment correctly, they decided to act tough. The current feeling in NDA circles in the capital is that it's time to be firm once and for all. But this does not mean that the BJP is working for a face-off vis-a-vis the Trinamul Congress. Top leaders of the BJP are of the view that Ms Banerjee will ultimately listen to reason.

But the general mood in the Trinamul camp in Calcutta is a little different. Party workers want Ms Banerjee to react to New Delhi's virtual "rejection" of her demand. They want her to join issue with the BJP and, if possible, negotiate with the Congress and Saifuddin Choudhary for a *mahajot*.

PRECIPITATING MATTERS

- Trinamul workers prepare for a showdown
- Behind-the-scene activity catches Mamata off-guard
- Allies tell PM not to give in to pressure tactics
- Naidu backs Vajpayee

THE TIMES OF INDIA

6 OCT 2000

Talk sense on oil, Karunanidhi tells M

NDA pressure forces Trinamul backtrack

Prabha Jagannathan
NEW DELHI 6 OCTOBER

WITHOUT A sound political support strategy as a back-up for an ultimatum to the Centre, the mighty fall hard. Trinamul Congress chief and NDA Ms Mamata Banerjee who earlier this week was self-proclaimed in a "win-win" situation appears to have learnt the lesson the hard way from the Centre on Friday, forcing her to backtrack on her resignation as minister and her threat to withdraw support from the NDA.

Well-placed NDA sources disclosed that the crucial straws that broke the camel's back were the possibility of a division in her own ranks and the counter-pressure from the Centre that without falling in line with the ruling alliance's position on a rollback in the price hike of petroleum products, Ms Banerjee stood to lose considerably in her hometurf West Bengal.



Karunanidhi: TOUGH TALK

In fact, the facsimile message of the PM notwithstanding, the Centre is understood to have firmly told Ms Banerjee through senior alliance leader and DMK chief M Karunanidhi on Friday that she was in no position absolutely to dictate the quantum of cuts in the price hike for LPG and kerosene to the Centre now.

Making it amply clear, in the first count, that the ruling BJP had the active support of other heavyweights in the alliance such as the TDP and the Samata Party in choosing to put off a decision on a possible rollback, petroleum minister Ram Naik reiterated his view-point firmly on Thursday that he was opposed to the demand posed by Ms Banerjee.

In the second count, a section

of the view within the party meeting in Calcutta on Friday is believed to have leaned towards distancing itself from the BJP. A gradual movement towards this was understood to have been preferred given the intense pressure on the party to perform at its optimum politically in the coming assembly elections. Functioning from within the Centre in consonance with the BJP, its ally in the Lok Sabha elections, was however perceived as imperative for this in the run-up to the elections.

The tensions within the Trinamul itself on the question of continued support to the NDA are unlikely to have escaped Ms Banerjee's attention. Three of the party's nine MPs are keen on a ministerial berth at the Centre while senior leader and MoS for external affairs Ajit Panja has not made his disgruntlement with his lack of seniority in the Union Cabinet

a secret.

The points are understood to have been brought none too sharply to Ms Banerjee by a key ally of the NDA, the DMK. Party chief and Tamil Nadu chief minister M Karunanidhi, according to BJP sources, who was deputed by the Centre to contact the Trinamul chief.

The DMK leader is believed to have underlined to Ms Banerjee that if she planned to project herself as a responsible chief ministerial aspirant to replace veteran Jyoti Basu in Calcutta, she would have to take the concerns of the key constituent BJP and the other allies of the NDA into pointed cognisance and work within these parameters to shore her political aspirations.



FACESAVER: Mamata Banerjee shows reporters the fax from Prime Minister Vajpayee telling her to withdraw her resignation. — Mona Chowdhury

Part-rollback likely this month

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 6 OCTOBER

THE GOVERNMENT may actually make a partial rollback of petroleum prices after Prime Minister Vajpayee returns from his surgery at the end of the month, although it might seem that Mamata Banerjee has given in to the Prime Minister's persuasions.

The "second look" promised by the Prime Minister to Ms Banerjee on Friday resulted in her withdrawing her resignation from the Vajpayee government. She will resume her duties from tomorrow (Saturday), she promised.

Government managers reckoned that by October 25, when Mr Vajpayee is due back from Mumbai after his knee surgery, international crude oil prices will register a slight decline, enough to warrant a legitimate rollback in the domestic prices.

The government is planning to bring down the petro-product prices then. This political balancing act hinges almost completely on an international dip in oil prices, but there has apparently been little thought given to the outcome of a possible rollback if international prices continue to climb.

This, analysts said, is very optimistic, although the price of oil slid a trifle on Friday after US President Bill Clinton released 30 million barrels of oil from the US strategic petroleum reserve. But according to market reports on Friday, oil recovered



ROAD AHEAD: Prime Minister Vajpayee at his residence in New Delhi on Friday. — PTI

lost ground with benchmark Brent 23 cents higher on Friday and expected to continue climbing.

However, the government is keen to avoid the perception that it had caved in to Mamata's blackmailing tactics.

According to sources familiar with developments, there had initially been a section of opinion within the government that advocated a minor rollback of prices.

Rao, Buta will be sentenced today, counsels seek leniency

The Times of India News Service
NEW DELHI: Counsels for former prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and former Union minister Buta Singh requested the trial court on Wednesday that their clients be released on probation in the JMM bribery case—that is, the two politicians be released for their good conduct and the services they have rendered to the country during their career. After hearing the defence and the prosecution, special judge Ajit Bharihoke said that he would decide on the quantum of sentence on Thursday.

Mr Rao and Mr Singh have been convicted under different sections of the Indian Penal Code and Prevention of Corruption Act. They can be imprisoned for up to seven years.

The judge also directed accused-turned-appraiser Shailender Mahato to surrender the Rs 50 lakhs he had received as a bribe to vote against the no-confidence motion in 1993.

In his statement before the court, Mr Mahato said that he had deposited the bribe money in his private account and two separate party accounts. He said that the state could confiscate the entire bribe amount.

Quoting a supreme court judgment, CBI counsel R.M. Tewary said that corruption was "rampant among public servants" and requested the judge to deal firmly with the accused. Mr Tewary argued that Mr Rao and Mr Buta Singh had committed "royal thievery. It is not only contagious, but if not controlled, will spread like fire in a jungle".

Mr Tewary said that the act committed by the two men was anti-people and had shaken the cultural heritage and socio-economic system of the country. He requested the court to announce a

sentence which would act as a deterrent.

Mr Rao's counsel R.K. Anand requested the court to show leniency to his client in view of his education, age and deteriorating health. He also urged the judge to consider his 65 years of service as a leader and as prime minister during which he had solved several of the nation's problems.

Mr Anand said that there was no evidence on record to show that Mr Rao had had a separate meeting with Buta Singh and Suraj Mandal at his residence. "If ever there was a transaction, where is the agreement as to how much money was given and who gave it?"

Mr Anand said that the prosecution was still to prove whether the money in the bank accounts of the JMM leaders had come from

bribes or compromised party funds. Since the source of the money was not established, the CBI had also failed to prove his client's financial capabilities and mobility, he said.

"The evidence on record is scanty and it has become a sin for a man to come forward and accept that there was a meeting between him and the Jharkand leader on the formation of the Jharkand council."

Buta Singh's counsel Rajinder Singh said the offence was not a case of bribery but a case of extortion. He said the four JMM MPs were more at fault as they were "hobnobbing" with different parties. "Against the backdrop of the last 50 years, the parties are still ready to topple a minority government."

Drawing a parallel between the 1993 government and the present one, he said, "Then too it was a minority government. So it is today, when a government ally is threatening to withdraw if the hike in petrol prices is not brought down."

VOTE-BANK CASE

- Mahato told to surrender Rs 50 lakhs
- CBI seeks most severe punishment
- Source of money not established: Rao's advocate
- JMM MPs more at fault, says Buta's advocate

THE TIMES OF INDIA

1 2 OCT 2000

■ Bail till 8 November ■ Assets probe ordered against JMM leaders

Rao, Buta get three years

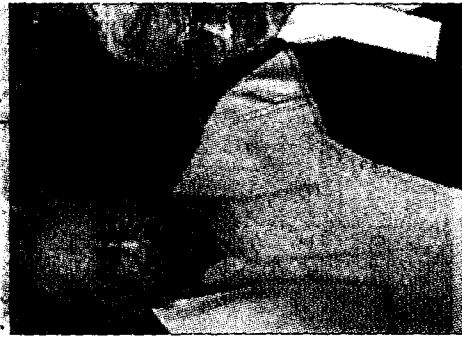
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Oct. 12. — Mr PV Narasimha Rao and Mr Buta Singh were today sentenced to three years' rigorous imprisonment and fined Rs 200,000 each in the JMM MPs' bribery case.

The sentences, however, will remain suspended till 8 November to enable the former Prime Minister and former Cabinet minister to appeal to the High Court.

Pronouncing the order, the special judge, Mr Ajit Bharihoke, also directed the CBI to register cases against Mr Sibusoren, Mr Suraj Mandal and Mr Simon Marandi (JMM MPs who received bribes) for possessing assets disproportionate to known sources of income. The judge did not order registration of a case against Mr Shailendra Mahato, who had turned approver.

Mr Rao and Mr Singh were given three years' RI and fined Rs 100,000 each for offences



Mr Narasimha Rao after the sentence at Vigyan Bhavan. — API/PTI



A securityman shields Mr Buta Singh after the sentence. — API/PTI

The special judge said Rs 1,62,83,000 was found in the accounts of the four former JMM MPs and joint accounts with their family members. That attracted provisions of Section 13(i)(e) of the PCA (a public servant being in possession of pecuniary resources or property disproportionate to known sources of income), Mr Bharihoke said.

The special judge ruled that the money in those accounts was not covered by the immunity under Article 105(ii) of the Constitution (powers and privileges of Parliament and MPs). That money was said to be donations to the JMM, for which no explanation was available and thus "clearly attracted" PCA provisions, he said.

The final act in the high-profile trial for political corruption was played out within less than 15 minutes. The special judge entered the courtroom immediately after Mr Rao had arrived at 1.50 p.m. and straightaway delivered his order. The

lawyers were not in action today, except for the bails.

A poignant silence descended on the makeshift courtroom in the Vigyan Bhavan complex after the sentence was pronounced. Mr Rao looked crestfallen. Mr Buta Singh buried his face in hands as his family members and friends, including "supercop" Mr KPS Gill, could not contain their dejection. Smiles returned after bail applications were accepted.

Mr Rao and Mr Buta Singh moved applications under Section 389 of the CrPC stating their intention to go in appeal and seeking bail. Mr Bharihoke directed that they furnish bail bonds of Rs 200,000 each with a like surety.

Initially Mr Bharihoke mentioned 1 November as the date for appeal, but extended it till 8 November after court pointed to the High Court vacation.

■ More reports on pages 4 and 6

Indianise Union government first: V.P.

'Forget RSS call, scrutinise & change policies of BJP-led NDA alliance'

BY OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Oct. 20: Former Prime Minister V.P. Singh on Friday said the need of the hour was to Indianise the Union government which has surrendered to the foreign powers, severely hurting the interests of the productive force of the country such as the farmers, youth and labour.

"Those who are making noises about Indianising Indian Christians and Muslims should first try to Indianise the Union government," Mr Singh said.

He said the Union government has taken a number of decisions which "go against national interest."

He said the liberalising the import of 714 items before the 2003 deadline was a clear indication as to whose interest the present Union government was protecting. "The agricultural imports will hurt farmers in every state of our country. While the import of palm oil was ruining farmers in the

South, imported-wheat was creating a serious problems for the farmers in Punjab and other states. The soyabean import has brought the farmers of Madhya Pradesh to the verge of being completely destroyed."

He said there were many provisions in the WTO agreement, using which the government could have protected the farmers.

"But the weapons provided under the WTO are not being used by the government to defend our farmers, who are committing suicide."

He said the government owed an explanation to the people for its failure to impose higher duties on import of these items. This, he said, was especially so as WTO allowed to levy higher duties.

"Whose interest is the government protecting when it is reluctant to use weapons under the WTO for the protection of farmers?" the former Prime Minister asked.

Mr Singh said that during his regime he had stopped import of edible oil. "But

under the present government, forty per cent of our total consumption of edible oil is being imported. For the edible oil only, the government is paying a huge import bill of Rs 9,000 crores," he said.

Terming government's idea of achieving nine per cent growth rate as a "fool's dream," Mr Singh said it can never be possible without giving a big boost to agriculture sector.

The former Prime Minister said now the government is talking about corporatisation of agriculture. He said this is the most dangerous move.

"It is against national interest. The country can not be run by a bank clerk's mentality.

There has to be some political assessment of the situation before taking such crucial decisions. The corporatisation would bring back a bigger zamindari system. We have experienced the ill-effects of a sort of corporatisation in our country when the British replaced the normal crop of Bihar with indi-

go. What had happened after that? There was famine in the state. There have been famines in many African countries due to this corporatisation. Still the present government talks of going ahead with it. I think it will be anti-national."

He said senior members of present government say that there are mountains of foodgrains rotting in godowns. "These are not mountains of foodgrains but mountains of poverty."

The government has raised the price of foodgrains so much that the poor man can not afford it. So on one side, there are the so-called mountains of foodgrains, and on the other there is malnutrition."

Mr Singh also requested Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee not to allow 26 per cent foreign equity in the nation's flag carrier Air-India. "Even the United States, considered the pope of capitalism, has not allowed 26 per cent foreign capital in its airline."

EXCISE DUTY CUT TO CUSHION IMPACT?

Oil prices to go up

By Sushma Ramachandran *23/9*

HO 1
NEW DELHI, SEPT. 22. As world oil prices soar to record levels, the Central Government is gearing to meet the impact by raising the prices of oil products and cutting taxes. The extent of the hike will depend on the Finance Ministry's willingness to reduce import and excise duties on crude oil and petroleum products. Since the price hike is bound to have an inflationary impact as well as being an unpopular move, the final contours of the price revision plan would be worked out at tomorrow's Cabinet meeting.

The Prime Minister, Mr. A.B. Vajpayee, had hinted that oil prices would be raised saying the country had to face hard decisions owing to high international crude prices. He was reportedly briefed by the Finance Minister, Mr. Yashwant Sinha, after returning from the U.S. The Petroleum Minister, Mr. Ram Naik, has cut short his visit to Indonesia, indicating the urgency for an early decision on oil prices.

Official sources say there is no option but to raise prices of diesel, cooking gas and kerosene since these contribute substantially to the growing deficit in the oil pool account. As for petrol (motor spirit), an argument is being put forward that a small increase in prices could help minimise the increases of other products. This is despite the fact that petrol prices are already higher than world levels.

The extent of the price hike will be determined by the extent of reduction in import and excise duties on oil products. Petroleum Ministry officials say cutting customs duty on diesel will virtually eliminate the subsidy element on this product. The Ministry has also sought a decrease in the countervailing excise duty of 16 per cent on petroleum products.

The cuts in duties may not have much of an impact on the Finance Ministry's target of revenue collections this year as the budget estimates were based on an average price of \$ 20 a barrel of crude oil. Since world prices have now touched a record level of \$ 34.5 for the Brent benchmark crude oil, the excise and customs duty collections will be much higher. A reduction in duties may thus not affect revenue inflows, it is argued.

The increase in diesel, cooking gas and kerosene prices is also in line with the structured plan to dis-

J. f. lew
mantle the administered pricing mechanism (APM) to eliminate subsidies. With international prices having risen steeply, these subsidies have ballooned. On kerosene, the subsidy is now Rs. 8 a litre, on diesel Rs. 5 a litre and Rs. 170 a cylinder of cooking gas. But the subsidy could have been reduced gradually at least in the case of diesel as it was taken out of the APM three years ago. This would have reduced the burden on the consumer. Subsidy on this product is estimated at over Rs. 11,000 crores.

For this reason also, a hike in diesel prices has a serious inflationary impact. But there is little option, since the oil pool account deficit is set to cross Rs.

Govt. will take right decision: BJP

NEW DELHI, SEPT. 22. The BJP today adopted a cautious approach on the possibility of a hike in the prices of petroleum products as indicated by the Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, saying it favoured a "soft option".

Reacting to Mr. Vajpayee's statement that "hard decisions" would have to be taken to deal with surging international crude prices, the BJP spokesman, Mr. M. Venkaiah Naidu, told reporters here that the Government would take the right decision. — PTI

10,000 crores. By the end of the year, it may cross Rs. 22,000 crores at the current level of world prices.

The oil refining companies are consequently in dire financial straits. Already operating on wafer-thin margins, the companies are owed huge amounts by the Oil Coordination Committee (OCC). Fortunately, in the case of domestic crude, the refineries are only paying \$ 17 a barrel. But domestic production is declining and imported crude forms about 70 per cent of their requirement. With world prices rising, these imports may now cost over Rs. 80,000 crores. In any case, with the Government desperate to reduce the burden on the exchequer, consumers will have to brace themselves for another increase in prices of petroleum products.

THE HINDU

7 SEP 2000

Farooq presses for consensus

New Delhi
18 JULY

JAMMU AND Kashmir chief minister Farooq Abdullah is on a "mission" to evolve consensus for greater autonomy to the state by meeting important political leaders with a team of his ministers and briefing them about the issue.

The "mission" started with a two-round meeting, spread over two consecutive days, with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Monday night and Tuesday morning where he introduced his team of ministers formed to discuss the autonomy issue.

Earlier, in the day he met home minister L.K. Advani and discussed the issue with him. Later on Tuesday night he met Congress president Sonia Gandhi and former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral.

"I will meet every single leader and try to evolve a consensus over the issue," said Abdullah. The chief minister will be meeting Samajwadi Party president Mulayam Singh Yadav on Wednesday morning before flying back to Srinagar.

In the second phase, sometime next week, Abdullah will also meet Andhra Pradesh chief minister Chandra Babu Naidu and his Tamil Nadu counterpart M. Karunanidhi.

"Devolution of powers and autonomy are only two sides of the same coin and there is no difference between the two," he told reporters when asked whether his party would accept devolution of powers instead of autonomy.

Asked if he had been assured by the Centre that it will be setting up a ministerial group for continuing the discussions he said "something has to be formed... May be this group will be the solution." — PTI

Congress to form sub-committee

New Delhi
18 JULY

IN A bid to evolve a national consensus over the issue of autonomy for Jammu and Kashmir, Congress announced the formation of a sub-committee for the purpose after chief minister Farooq Abdullah on Tuesday met party president Sonia Gandhi and briefed her about recent developments on the issue.

The Congress president said the sub-committee will discuss the autonomy issue with the state government's ministerial team, Mr Abdullah told reporters here after meeting the leader of Opposition for over 30 minutes.

Mr Abdullah was accompanied by the ministerial team comprising state urban development minister G.M. Shah, law and parliamentary affairs minister P.L. Handoo, finance minister Abdul Rahim Rather, education minister Mohammed Shafi and former industries minister Bodh Raj Bali.

The same team had a half-an-hour meeting with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Tuesday morning. About his talks with Ms Gandhi, Mr Abdullah said: "The dialogue was in a cordial atmosphere and we presented our case before the leader of opposition on which she announced the formation of sub-committee."

Mr Abdullah said he was planning to meet various political leaders to seek a consensus over the autonomy issue.

Senior Congress leaders like Ghulam Nabi Azad, Madhavrao Scindia, Moti Lal Vohra and Pranab Mukherjee were present during the meeting held between Ms Gandhi and Mr Abdullah. — PTI

TALKING POINT

The Economic Times

19 JUL 2000

Centre says no to

Our Political Bureau

NEW DELHI 20 JULY

THE CENTRE, on Thursday, turned down the demand of the Maharashtra government for 27 additional companies of paramilitary forces, for dealing with any law and order problem which may arise if the court orders the arrest of Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray.

Union home minister L.K. Advani, citing the unavailability of the paramilitary personnel, conveyed the Centre's inability to dispatch forces to the two ministers of state for home of Maharashtra. The two ministers — Manik Thakre and Kripa Shankar Singh — had reached the Capital as emissaries of chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh.

The choice of two Congress ministers as emissaries, was interesting in the light of the tussle between the party and its ally, the Nationalist Congress Party, to appropriate the credit for the action against the Sena chief. The Congress, which was caught off guard by the NCP leader's move and home minister Chhagan Bhujbal, was constrained to go along with it and is now trying to dispel the impression that it was a reluctant partner in the episode.

The attempt to grab credit was obvious on Wednesday, and also when the Congress spokesperson attributed the action to the chief minister.

The claim for the "honours" stood in contrast to the conspicuous silence of party president Sonia Gandhi, who has lately been trying to overcome the image of a reticent politician. In fact, she has been speaking on far more complex issues such as autonomy for Jammu and Kashmir and the direction of economic reforms.

The course of events is being viewed by the NDA managers with mixed emotions. They are unhappy with the Shiv Sena chief's dramatic move in getting its ministers to "quit." That, at one stroke, gave a kind of all-India dimension to what would have otherwise remained a regional affair.

NDA leaders consider the Sena action as totally uncalled for because of at least three reasons.

- First, there is little that the Centre can do so far as frustrating the NCP-Congress move goes.
- Secondly, the issue as to whether Mr Thackeray will end up in jail has to be decided by the court.

The legal opinion available with the Centre indicates that the response of the court will, in all probability, be based on the principle of the "limitations of law." Simply put, this principle requires that prosecution for an offence — like the one Mr Thackeray has been charged with — for which maximum punishment could be three years of imprisonment — should be initiated within three years of its alleged commission. Mr Thackeray's alleged offence, penning the inflammatory editorials in the Sena mouthpiece, dates back to 1993.

- Finally, it is felt here that the court will not deny Mr Thackeray bail even if it exercises its discretion as permitted under Section 473 of the CrPC.

Mumbai's plea for forces



FOLLOW THE LEADER: Sena members vow to support Bal Thackeray in Mumbai on Thursday

Bhujbal shifts arrest onus on police

Our Mumbai Bureau

MUMBAI 20 JULY

AFTER A tense Wednesday, Mumbai was peaceful, although Maharashtra home minister Chhagan Bhujbal maintained his position even on Thursday that the police will decide on the Sena chief's arrest.

Meanwhile, the Shiv Sena on Thursday decided not to seek Mr Bal Thackeray's bail, if he was arrested.

"After completing all the legalities," the police will take its decision on the arrest of Thackeray for his alleged role in the 1992-93 riots in the metropolis, Mr Bhujbal said.

"We have given a go-ahead to police to prosecute the Sena chief and now the police will decide on the arrest," Mr Bhujbal told reporters at Vidhan Bhavan, when questioned on rumours of Mr Thackeray's arrest and the plea to maintain law and order.

When asked about the deployment of Rapid Action Force (RAF) in the city, Mr Bhujbal said: "It is our duty to protect the people and maintain law and order."

PM asked me to quit, says Ram Jethmalani

The Times of India News Service
PUNE: Ram Jethmalani, who resigned as Union law minister, said on Sunday that he was asked by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to quit from the cabinet. Mr Jethmalani faxed his resignation letter from here on Saturday evening.

Mr Jethmalani told mediapersons here that his repeated friction with attorney-general Soli Sorabjee had led to this situation.

Emphasising that his resignation was not voluntary, Mr Jethmalani said the immediate development, leading to his resignation, was Mr Sorabjee's stand.

ments to make," Mr Jethmalani said when he was besieged by reporters.

Mr Jethmalani said he was unhappy that Mr Vajpayee did not give him a chance to explain his position and had abruptly sought his resignation. He said though he had differences with the PM, he would not like to make them vocal at this stage. "My PM is wearing a crown of thorns and I would not like to add to those thorns," Mr Jethmalani said. He said that he would speak in detail "in due course of time" even as he felt it necessary to record his protest over the attorney-general's behaviour.

Maharashtra imbroglio claims its first victim

The Times of India News Service

NEW DELHI: Though the week-long Maharashtra crisis—involving the Congress-NCP ministry in Mumbai, the NDA government at the Centre and the Shiv Sena over the threatened arrest and prosecution of Sena chief Bal Thackeray—remained unresolved, it claimed its first, unexpected victim: Union law minister Ram Jethmalani.

The end to Mr Jethmalani's boisterous stint in Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government came with a three-line, terse announcement from the Rashtrapati Bhavan on Sunday.

As law minister in Mr Vajpayee's first 13-day government, Mr Jethmalani had created a furore by summoning all files on the Jain hawala scandal from the CBI and in his second avatar as the urban development minister he had caused an upheaval by pushing for the removal of urban land ceiling laws, and opening the housing sector to non-state, private and foreign investors.

If his assertiveness led to uneasy relations with the bureaucracy, the ignominious exit from the cabinet was due to, according to a source, his "unrefined" rebuttal of supreme court chief justice A.S. Anand's remarks about divergent stands of the Centre and its ministers on the Srikrishna Commission report on the 1993 Mumbai riots.

Justice Anand did not name the ministers whose statements he found were at conflict with the government's affidavit before the supreme court. But Mr Jethmalani in his rejoinder struck a personal note. "If His Lordship had meant to be critical, in fairness, I should have been invited to throw light which in the past has often illuminated judicial minds," his statement read. Mr Jethmalani went further, "The learned chief justice should at least have realised that he was making comments about a minister who knows his law as well as anyone else."

The central leadership is learnt to have found the intemperate tone and tenor of Mr Jethmalani's statement unacceptable, and therefore asked him to resign.



Ram Jethmalani

RAMSPEAK

- Soli Sorabjee's stand led to my resignation
- My PM is wearing a crown of thorns and I would not like to add to those thorns
- The moment I reached Pune, I faxed my resignation
- I have put up with a lot of things which I do not wish to go into now

Mr Jethmalani's dramatic resignation and his comments against Mr Vajpayee and the attorney-general came in the wake of strong observations by the supreme court on controversial comments made by three ministers in the Union cabinet over the Srikrishna Commission report.

A supreme court bench, headed by chief justice A.S. Anand, had castigated some ministers for making statements that were contradictory to the affidavit filed by the Central government.

Mr Jethmalani had reacted to the supreme court's observations by stating that he "knew the law as well as anyone else", apparently provoking the Prime Minister to call for his resignation.

Speaking to reporters at the national film archives auditorium here on Sunday, Mr Jethmalani said in any case he was planning to resign on his own and had intended to announce his resignation at a news conference in Pune.

However, he received the intimation from the PMO, asking for his resignation while he was on way to the airport. "The moment I reached Pune, I faxed my resignation from my residence here," he said. "The Prime Minister had two choices before him, one was to have a pliant attorney-general and the other to have a no-nonsense law minister. He has made his choice. I have no further com-

Mr Jethmalani said that "constant pinpricks" from the attorney-general had made his continuance in the cabinet unbearable. The latest hearing in the supreme court, when the attorney-general failed to defend the law minister, was the last straw on the camel's back, he said.

"I have put up with a lot of things which I do not wish to go into now. But the last straw on the camel's back was provided by the attorney-general's performance at the supreme court's hearing on the implementation of the Srikrishna Commission report on Friday," Mr Jethmalani said.

Jethmalani responsible for his resignation: Sorabjee

The Times of India News Service

NEW DELHI: Ram Jethmalani—who was asked by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to quit—"knows the reasons for his resignation. He did not require my help for his exit from the ministry," attorney-general Soli Sorabjee said here on Sunday evening. Reacting to Mr Jethmalani's remarks on his ignominious exit from the Union cabinet, Mr Sorabjee, in a statement to *The Times of India*, termed as "incorrect" Mr Jethmalani's account of the proceedings in the supreme court.

TUESDAY, JULY 25, 2000

11.9.12 25/7

MR. JETHMALANI & COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

THE RESIGNATION OF Mr. Ram Jethmalani from the Union Cabinet was the inevitable outcome of his tendency to make ill considered remarks. Not only did Mr. Jethmalani make light of the principle of collective responsibility that ought to guide his behaviour (at least as long as he was a part of the Cabinet), the innuendoes he hurled at the judges of the apex court had made his continuance in the Union Cabinet untenable. Indeed, Mr. Jethmalani's conduct, even before his remarks against the Supreme Court bench hearing the public interest litigation (PIL) pertaining to the action taken on the report of the Sri Krishna Commission of Enquiry, had warranted his exit from the Union Cabinet. Take for instance the point he was making about the "legal" position on the Union Government's powers to act against the State Government in Maharashtra; rather than sticking to the established practice of letting the Attorney-General have the final say on such matters, Mr. Jethmalani went about airing his opinion. Even if he may be a legal luminary in his own right, Mr. Jethmalani as Minister for Law, Justice and Company Affairs knew well that the Government ought to go by the advice of the Attorney-General on matters pertaining to law.

Indeed, the reasons behind Mr. Jethmalani's remarks and his "determination" to speak out against any legal proceeding against Mr. Bal Thackeray are not far to seek. He owes his membership in the Rajya Sabha and his claim to membership in the Union Cabinet to Mr. Thackeray; though he may be an "independent" member in the Upper House (in the technical sense) Mr. Jethmalani's position in the ruling NDA was hardly different from that of Mr. Manohar Joshi, Mr. Suresh Prabhu and Mr.

Balasaheb Vikhe Patil; and yet he did not announce his resignation from the Union Cabinet along with the others from the Shiv Sena. Mr. Jethmalani, as it appears now, was wanting to do from within the Cabinet — pressure the Union Government to act against the Maharashtra Government — what the three other loyal soldiers of Mr. Thackeray were trying to do by announcing their decision to quit the Union Cabinet. The imperative for Mr. Vajpayee and the political leadership of the NDA as a combine, at least after all these, is to accept the resignation of the Shiv Sena's Ministers. Any further delay in doing so will only encourage other members of the Cabinet to dispute the advice of the Attorney-General, Mr. Soli Sorabjee. It is important that such situations where members of the political executive hurl innuendoes at the judiciary be averted.

The Jethmalani episode has also brought to the fore the scant regard some of the members of the Union Cabinet have been showing for the principle of collective responsibility. Mr. Jethmalani was not the only one who was guilty of this. All these had led the Supreme Court to even lament the lack of collective responsibility in the Cabinet. It is in this context that one would expect the Prime Minister, Mr. A. B. Vajpayee, and others in the political leadership of the ruling combine, at least now, to ensure that those holding positions in the Cabinet behave in a responsible fashion and bind themselves to the norms of governance by Constitutional principles rather than misuse their own positions to display their loyalties to one or another leader. The Supreme Court's reminder to the Government on the principle of collective responsibility has come not a day too soon.

APHC regrets Hizbul's hasty ceasefire offer

By Law Kumar Mishra
The Times of India News Service

SRINAGAR: While there are no visible signs of ceasefire in the state, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) on Wednesday expressed regret over the "hasty" decision of the Hizbul Mujahideen to declare a unilateral truce, saying it would create confusion among the people. According to the APHC, the Kashmir problem can be solved only through honest and meaningful dialogue.

The five-hour extraordinary meeting of the APHC's executive council held at the residence of its former chairman Syed Ali Shah Geelani described the Hizbul decision as hasty and said the unilateral ceasefire would create hurdles in the settlement of the Kashmir problem. The meeting was attended among others by chairman Abdul Gani Bhat, Abdul Gani Lone, advocate Bashir Ahmad, Bashir Ahmad Toota and Ghulam Nazki. While Yaseen Malik did not come, Maulvi Umar Farooq left for Iran on Tuesday. The APHC's guarded statement has made it clear that the Hurriyat does not want to antagonise either the Hizbul Mujahideen

or the militant groups opposed to the ceasefire. Although the APHC described the Hizbul action as hasty, it did not condemn it. Meanwhile, the United Jihad Council, an alliance of 11 Kashmiri militant groups, condemned the ceasefire offer and "expelled" the Hizbul Mujahideen from the council.

The ceasefire offer notwithstanding, violence continued to rock the state on Wednesday, with low intensity devices exploding and militants getting killed in different parts. Low intensity IED's planted at Shalimar, Nishar and Boulevard road near Dal Lake, where a number of hotels accommodating Amarnath pilgrims are located, exploded in the afternoon. However, no damage was caused.

In another incident, police constables on patrol duty were injured when a grenade was lobbed at them at Nawa Kadal Chowk. They injured constables have been hospitalised. Three militants were killed at Reshwari and Guzdyal in Kupwara district in an encounter with the BSF and the army in the morning. Security forces also raided a militant hideout in Srinagar and recovered 16 IED's and a huge quantity of explosives.

THE TIMES OF INDIA

27 JUL 2000

Jethmalani never practised the art of silence: Vajpayee

The Times of India News Service
NEW DELHI: Prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Friday said that it was out of concern for maintaining harmony between the judiciary and the executive that he had asked Ram Jethmalani to step down as law minister. He also said he had ordered an inquiry into the alleged leakage of official papers by Mr Jethmalani.

Replying to a heated and at times acrimonious discussion on the issue in both houses of parliament, Mr Vajpayee said Mr Jethmalani, as law minister, had come perilously close to tinkering with the equilibrium between the two wings of the system.

"We cannot allow any tension between the judiciary and executive to persist, nor can we challenge the judiciary. As Prime Minister, my duty was to see that a balance between the two wings was maintained," Mr Vajpayee told parliament in a prepared statement.

The PM's refusal to prolong the discussion any further led to angry scenes in the Lok Sabha, with the Congress eventually walking out. Some of the BJP's allies in the House— notably the Telugu Desam, the Trinamul Congress and the JD (U)—also appeared deeply embarrassed by the government's reluctance to debate the issue. TDP and JD (U) MPs told *The Times of India* later that they were keen for Mr Vajpayee to say something more.

Running down his former cabinet colleague for what he said was a tendency to enter into a confrontation on every pretext, the PM said, "Mr Jethmalani's problem is that he never practised the

art of silence; he was asked to keep shut on matters not pertaining to him, but I did not succeed.

When I saw that tension was mounting between the judiciary and the executive, I used my power as Prime Minister and did my duty."

Mr Vajpayee said that as PM, it was his prerogative to ask a minister to step down. Affirming his determination not to act under pressure, the PM said, "I would rather quit."

Mr Vajpayee was responding to points raised by members during a discussion following his statement. "We completely disagree with his perception of the facts," the PM said, referring to the charges made by Mr Jethmalani against the Chief Justice of India and the attorney-general.

The opposition members trained their guns on attorney-general Soli Sorabjee, demanding he be summoned before the House to answer the charges against him.

The accusations against the A-G related mainly to his private advice to business houses in several cases. The two instances cited were his advice to the Hindujas on a power project in Andhra Pradesh in interpreting the Centre's counter-guarantee and to another industrialist in a case being heard by the Delhi high court.

Congress member H.R. Bhardwaj, a former law minister, argued that since the A-G held a constitutional position, he could not do private work. He said it was rather strange that a law minister was sacked for falling out with the A-G when it should have been "the other way round".

Legal eagles stage court in Lok Sabha

The Times of India News Service

NEW DELHI: For a while



Arun Jaitly

between two legal eagles. New law minister Arun Jaitly and articulate Congress member Kapil Sibal were engaged in a deadly duel. With both quoting

the law book, parliament heard where salvos were fired and ward-ed off with evenly matched skills by the prosecutor (Sibal) and the defence counsel (Jaitly) during the discussion on the Jethmalani issue in the Rajya Sabha on Friday.

From the dull noise of generality suddenly the debate turned to specifics with Mr Sibal marshalling facts with the flourish of an ace interrogator. His charge: The Attorney-general did give opinions to a private party being investigated by CBI. According to Article 76 (2), the A-G cannot give any opinion to a private party.

Then came another revelation: Mr Sorabjee offered advice not only to the Hindujas but to Kishore Chand Chhabria in another case. Mentioning the figure of the A-G's impressive consultation fee, Mr Sibal urged the PM to direct Mr Sorabjee to step down.

Standing up to defend the A-G and the government, Mr Jaitly apparently sensed a challenge and perhaps felt an urge to join issue with a fellow lawyer with matching aggression.

LAW AND WAR

- Govt. defends CJI and A-G
- Oppn. demands A-G present his case in the House
- PM says Jethmalani was confrontationist
- A-G, not law minister should have quit: Congress

Govt's offer to Hizbul seen as a master move

By Siddharth Varadarajan
The Times of India News Service

NEW DELHI: One day after the Centre's unconditional invitation to the Hizbul Mujahideen to enter into a dialogue, the army declared a cease-fire against the militant group. And, though a ranking official of the Vajpayee government said on Saturday that any talks would have to be within the constitutional framework, it seems the Centre's sweeping offer to the HM still stands.

In brief remarks, shortly after Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee met Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Farooq Abdullah on Saturday morning, national security adviser Brajesh Mishra said no government representative could act "outside the constitution". He also ruled out tripartite talks with Pakistan.

On his part, Mr Abdullah said he welcomed any move that would help restore peace in Kashmir.

Hizbul's offer of talks suggested that even Pakistan wanted "peace on the border". He said he was in favour of Indo-Pakistan talks.

Mr Mishra's tautological observation about the constitution was deliberately left out of the Centre's announcement on Friday, leading both the HM and the APHC to react positively to what they felt was a sign of flexibility on New Delhi's part. In fact, Friday's decision to invite the Hizbul for talks was taken by the Centre after carefully considering the impact that a conditional invitation would have not just on the Hizbul's standing vis-a-vis other militant groups, but also on India's image internationally.

Although the HM announced its ceasefire from Srinagar, the government assumed the offer had the blessings, if not the active instigation, of Pakistan. While the other 'jehadi' groups accused the Hizbul of betrayal, Islamabad's response has been measured. Intelligence sources are convinced its strategy has been devised with two aims. First, to send a message to the U.S. that General Musharraf



F. Abdullah

is serious about "creating the conditions for a dialogue with India to succeed". Second, to call what Islamabad believes to be India's bluff on refusing to resume talks until cross-border terrorism comes to an end. "Islamabad also knows

that people in Kashmir are tired of militancy," an Indian army source said.

Indian officials are convinced that the authorities in Pakistan had assumed the Vajpayee government would not know how to

react to Hizbul's move. "They thought we would reject talks and be seen as spoilers. But that hasn't happened." Officials say it was precisely in order to confound Pakistan that the Centre decided to issue an unconditional invitation. And, judging from the off-the-record reactions of Western diplomats in New Delhi, the tactic seems to be paying off.

Official circles are tight-lipped about whether Friday's invitation was also based on advice Mr Mishra might have received before returning from Washington on Thursday night. But a former Indian diplomat told *The Times of India*, "There are many players beyond the subcontinent. Nothing can be ruled out."

THE TALKING GAME

- Intelligence sees Pak role in Hizbul's peace offer
- Govt's offer seen as move to checkmate Pak plans
- Tripartite talks with Pakistan ruled out
- Abdullah in favour of Indo-Pak talks

THE TIMES OF INDIA

30 JUL 2000

THE PANSKURA VERDICT

IN WRESTING THE Panskura Lok Sabha seat in West Bengal, Ms. Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress may not have exactly put the ruling Left Front on notice in the context of the Assembly poll which is less than a year away. But there can be little doubt that the sweeping defeat of the CPI nominee, Mr. Gurudas Dasgupta, a seasoned parliamentarian, in the June 5 byelection, is a major setback to the combine, given that the seat had been held by it for over two decades, and its perceived invincibility has received a good knock. In a sense, the Panskura verdict and the outcome of the civic polls held across the State just about a week earlier are at variance with the widely-shared perception that the Left Front is unassailable in the rural constituencies and the Trinamool Congress-BJP alliance's popular base is predominantly urban in character. In the municipal elections, the Left Front did remarkably well and the Congress(I), despite its striking organisational weaknesses, by and large held its ground, much to the chagrin of Ms. Banerjee who had failed to push through her plan for an anti-Left 'Grand Alliance', what with her own party turning in a dismal performance. As for Panskura, the Left Front has primarily itself, its internecine squabbles and bickerings at the grassroots level, to blame for its poor showing. In fact, there were early warning signals in the shape of a sharp drop in its victory margin over the last few elections which the Front had obviously ignored. The Left Front, which in any case may have to contend with the handicap of not having Mr. Jyoti Basu as its Chief Ministerial mascot, could be in trouble when facing the Assembly elections if the right lessons are not learnt from the Panskura experience.

One predictable consequence of the Panskura verdict is of course the revival of the campaign for Ms. Banerjee's pet 'Mahajot' concept which envisaged the coming together of all the mainstream anti-Left political parties, mainly

the Trinamool Congress, the Congress(I) and the BJP. After the civic polls that saw the Congress(I) performing creditably and much better than the Trinamool Congress, the prospects of the Grand Alliance were rated low. But in the post-Panskura context, the pro-'Mahajot' lobby in the Congress(I), among its chief protagonists being Mr. Ghani Khan Choudhury and Mr. Somen Mitra, is bound to push for the tieup vigorously, even if the pitch is unlikely to be queered till after the Calcutta and Salt Lake civic polls are over. Although the Congress(I) high command decided not to join forces with the TC-BJP combine and chose to put up its own candidate in Panskura, tokenism was palpable in its action, with no serious electioneering in evidence and the party's central leadership doing precious little to galvanise its cadres.

In fact, the Congress(I) high command's response to the 'Mahajot' idea has been marked by indecision and vacillation from the beginning. First, when the likes of Mr. Ghani Khan Choudhury and Mr. Somen Mitra insisted rather defiantly on a tieup with the Trinamool Congress within an overall grouping that included the BJP, Ms. Sonia Gandhi went along with them, even while party spokesmen were taking a no-truck-with-BJP (either direct or indirect) stand. On Ms. Banerjee refusing to snap ties with the BJP — only the naive would have expected her to break away from the dominant partner of the coalition ruling at the Centre — Ms. Gandhi applied the brakes, rather tentatively and more to buy time, but only to see the 'Mahajot' ghost returning to haunt her with greater vigour. It would be in the longer term interests of the Congress(I) not to let the ideological imperatives at the national level be overridden by narrow partisan considerations. Which is to say, there can be absolutely no compromise or equivocation in the matter of aligning with political forces that subscribe to or support communal or sectarian ideologies.

THE HINDU

15 JUN 2000

THE PARTY BEGINS: PASWAN CALLS FOR FACT & TACT IN ACTION

Opponents of divestment bow, give privatisation the big push

P.R. Ramesh

NEW DELHI 23 JUNE

THE CABINET Committee on Disinvestment (CCD) might not have achieved much in terms of concrete decisions, but in terms of building political opinion it appears to have achieved a lot as the remaining opponents of privatisation bowed to its inevitability.

In fact, there were startling revelations. Mr Ram Vilas Paswan, who has acquired the image of being a "dog in the manger," surprised his colleagues by saying that he had seen it first hand in the US. He saw there was no alternative to privatisation. All he asked for was tact in handling it. The Paswan line was for "fact, tact and act" that is, marshal the facts, move forward tactfully and act decisively. He sought a hassle-free atmosphere and pledged to deliver his pledge of corporatising the department of telecommunication (DoT) by October 1.

Mr Yashwant Sinha and Mr Arun Jaitley, the protagonists for privatisation, couldn't have asked for more.

Mr Paswan wasn't the only one. Heavy industries minister

Manohar Joshi, who's seeking to protect his patch, tried some dilatory tactics but also fell in line. He raised his familiar argument that there was no "coherent policy" on privatisation. This provoked Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee to make his only intervention in the meeting. Mr Vajpayee demanded to know what Mr Joshi meant by that.

Mr Sinha said the government's pronouncements at various stages of privatisation had brought clarity to the divestment process. A stern look from the PM and Mr Joshi was singing another tune. He went so far to say that privatisation of units under his administrative charge could be done "in a couple of hours."

He agreed "in principle" to the privatisation of the only jewel in his control — Maruti Udyog (MUL). Now the discussions at the next meeting on July 12 will be restricted to just two issues:

- Whether Suzuki should have the first right of refusal and
- Whether the divestment should wait for the new automobile policy as desired by his bureaucrats.

The third "opponent,"

petroleum minister Ram Naik, kept quiet during the meeting. He kept quiet even when another minister questioned his argument about oil being a strategic sector.

"The theory is spurious," the minister said. "If he holds oil as a strategic sector, isn't the fertiliser sector, which is crucial for food security, also a strategic sector?"

It is learnt that Mr Naik has already softened his opposition. On Wednesday he had had a meeting with the finance minister and told him about his reservations. The finance minister told him that it was for Mr Vajpayee to decide on the merit of his case.

The fourth minister who expressed his diffidence on privatisation, Mr Sharad Yadav, also kept mum during the meeting. Moreover, he had already acquiesced to the sell-off of Air India and Indian Airlines.

Friday's meeting wasn't quite a damp squib. On the contrary, the clearing of ideological and political doubts possibly sets the scene for dramatic announcements when the CCD meets next.

The Economic Times

24 JUN 2000

BJP releases
booklets on
Emergency

'Emergency can come back'

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, June 24. — The BJP today brought out two booklets — *Remember the Emergency and Strengthen Democracy and Darkness at Noon* — to tell the younger generation under what circumstances the emergency was imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975.

The party vice-president, Mr Jana Krishnamurthy, said that during the emergency, parliamentary rules were flouted, affecting tens of thousands of people. The release of the booklets coincides with the 25th anniversary of imposition of emergency.

The party will also start a week-long programme from tomorrow to educate people about the "dark chapter" of India's democracy and to ask them to remain vigilant to prevent its recurrence.

NEW DELHI, June 24. — The Union defence minister, Mr George Fernandes, has not ruled out the possibility of an internal emergency being imposed in the country again.

Speaking to reporters on the eve of the 25th "anniversary" of the Emergency, Mr Fernandes said, "If our polity fails to solve the problems of the people and our system fails to give justice to the oppressed and harassed, then a day may come when an emergency-like situation would arise".

It was the one-point programme of Indira Gandhi to foist dynastic rule on the country which led to the imposition of national emergency, he added. Should our political system and governance fail to address the people's problems, the country's democracy would continue to be under constant threat.

Asked if there was a fresh threat to liberty in the "institutionalised and organised fascism of the present government," Mr Fernandes remarked, "no government has functioned with the degree of transparency as this government". Speaking on the attacks on Christians by the Sangh Parivar, Mr Fernandes said it was the duty of the state governments to take action against any organisation that indulged in practices prejudicial to communal amity.

Mr Fernandes defended the Vajpayee government by saying that such incidents had taken place in the past as well. Few of the cases, he claimed, were also presented incorrectly. The Jhabua rape case, for instance, was not a case of any communal outrage.

The government, however, needed to assure the minorities to make them feel secure, he felt.



Mr George Fernandes

THE STATESMAN

25 JUN 2000

Ex-PMs meeting Basu to discuss Third Front

CALCUTTA, MAY 4. The former Prime Minister, Mr. V. P. Singh, today said there had been no discussion till now on the formation of a third front as an alternative to the BJP-led Government at the Centre. Mr. Singh, along with two other former Prime Ministers, Mr. Chandrasekhar and Mr. H D Deve Gowda, is scheduled to meet the CPI(M) veteran and West Bengal Chief Minister, Mr. Jyoti Basu.

Asked by reporters at the airport here about the purpose of his visit and the meeting with Mr. Basu, he said "certain matters of concern" would be discussed. "We want to draw the people's attention to those issues."

The three former Prime Ministers demanded scrapping of the Constitution Review Committee, saying any review of it must be done by elected peoples' representatives. They will meet Mr. Basu presumably to discuss the revival of the third front. — PTI

THE HINDU

- 5 MAY 2000

Shabnam *mausi* learns the rules of the game, blasts politicians

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

BHOPAL, March. 6. — Democracy turned a new leaf when Shabnam *mausi*, a eunuch, took oath as a legislator in the Madhya Pradesh Assembly here today. She is perhaps India's first eunuch MLA.

Shabnam *mausi* took the oath in Hindi. The members of both the Treasury and Opposition Benches overcame their initial hesitation and greeted her by thumping their desks.

Shabnam, who contested the recent by-polls to the Sohagpur Assembly constituency in Shahdol as an Independent, defeated both the Congress and the BJP nominees. Her victory is more convincing because the votes polled by her exceeded the combined votes of the BJP and the Congress candidates.

She polled 39,937 votes, against 22,074 of the BJP candidate, Mr Lallu Singh, and 17,282 of the Congress nominee, Mr Brijesh Singh.

Shabnam arrived here yesterday morning to a rousing welcome from the local eunuch community. Escorted by some eunuchs, she staged a dramatic entry into the Assembly premises this morning where she was mobbed by TV crew, reporters, photographers, and the Assembly staff.

Later, while talking to reporters, she described her election as a "victory of the people of Sohagpur." "I never dreamt of making it to the Assembly. But now I am here



Shabnam *mausi* (right), the first eunuch to be elected as an MLA, in Bhopal on Sunday. — AP/PTI

thanks to the support of the common people, particularly women, of my constituency."

Shabnam has learnt the rules of the game very fast. She blasted politicians for being corrupt and making "empty promises". "The politicians merely make noises and issue platitudes. They never work for the welfare of the common people," she said. She said she would never join any political party.

Shabnam's agenda for Sohagpur includes employment, education, primary health care, drinking water and good roads. The district is mainly inhabited by tribals and Dalits. "I have no family of my own", she said. "My electorate is now my family," she added. She also intends to campaign for banning the sale of liquor in

her constituency.

Shabnam admitted that her foray into politics has stunned both the ruling Congress party and the BJP.

"Some activists of a party even assaulted me when I was campaigning. They warned me that I should not contest the polls. The results, however, helped me have the last laugh."

Though uneducated, the 45-year-old can speak several north and south Indian languages and most of the dialects of Madhya Pradesh. Shabnam's father, Mr Gokul Prasad Sharma, was reportedly an IPS officer of the Maharashtra cadre.

She has been living in Anoopur, Shahdol, for the past 20 years after leaving her home

in Mumbai. She claims to have learnt Kathak and to have appeared in films like 'Amar Akbar Anthony' and 'Don'.

Shabnam's feat comes after four eunuchs won in last December's civic polls in the state. Kamla Jaan, contesting as an Independent, defeated the Congress and BJP nominees to clinch the mayoral post of the Katni Municipal Corporation reserved for women.

Three others were also elected to posts reserved for women, as Independents. Minabai was elected the chairperson of the Sehora Municipal Council. Hirabai and Gulshan were respectively elected to the Jabalpur Municipal Corporation and the Bina Municipal Council.

Ex-PMs, Basu discuss 'political situation'

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, MAY 16. Efforts to revive the 'third front', even if not exactly in the form it once existed, gained momentum with the four former Prime Ministers — Mr. V. P. Singh, Mr. Chandra Shekhar, Mr. H. D. Deve Gowda and Mr. I. K. Gujral — meeting the West Bengal Chief Minister, Mr. Jyoti Basu, here today.

They utilised Mr. Basu's visit — he was here in connection with the finalisation of the State's Plan — to pick up the thread where they had left it when they met him in Calcutta on April 30 with a proposal to get the 'third front' back on the rails. But after a nearly 30-

minute meeting, they had little to say except that they discussed the political situation and various possibilities to bring together all secular forces.

Sources in the CPI(M) said nothing dramatic was about to happen. The exercise was still in a preliminary stage with like-minded leaders thinking on how best to fight the BJP. "It is all very nebulous at this point, but certainly a beginning has been made," they said.

Mr. Basu, speaking to media-persons informally after the meeting, indicated that one idea being tossed around was to build a broad platform of "secular" parties, groups and individuals to

combat divisive tendencies.

"Even those who are ideologically opposed to us or do not share our economic policies are welcome to join the platform," he said. Congressmen committed to secularism could also come on board, Mr. Basu remarked.

However, the Congress(I) spokesperson, Mrs. Margaret Alva, later said her party had always spoken of the need for secular parties to work together as far as possible.

The former Prime Ministers, as they emerged from the meeting, said they reviewed the national situation and the need to work for a "third alternative". However, they declined to elaborate.

THE HINDU

17 MAY 2001

Jail for Laloo, bail for Rabri

HT Correspondent
Patna, April 5

BIHAR CHIEF Minister Rabri Devi was granted regular bail after she and her husband Laloo Prasad Yadav surrendered before the designated CBI court on Wednesday in the disproportionate asset (DA) case (RC 5(A)98). The judge, Mr S K Lal, however, refused bail to Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) president Laloo Yadav.

While Mrs Rabri Devi was granted bail after furnishing bail bonds of Rs 2 lakh with two sureties of the like amount each, the RJD chief was remanded in judicial custody in Beur central jail. Mr Laloo Yadav will be reproduced in the court on April 25.

The court directed the Chief Minister not to leave the country and to surrender her passport, if any, within ten days. In its order, the court observed that a housewife, in the present day society, was influenced by her husband and, therefore, Mrs Rabri Devi

could be charged with only abetment.

The designated CBI court, while rejecting the bail petition of Mr Laloo Yadav, observed that the offences levelled against him were very serious in nature and, therefore, it was not inclined to grant him regular bail.

It may be recalled that the CBI court on Tuesday after taking cognizance of the charge-sheet filed by the CBI, had ordered the issuance of non-bailable warrants against the Chief Minister and her husband.

After the Chief Minister and the RJD chief surrendered before the CBI Court around 8.00 am, arguments were put forth by defence counsel P N Pandey and Spl PP of the CBI L R Ansari in a packed courtroom.

Many Cabinet colleagues of the Chief Minister were present in the courtroom. They included Mr Ramchandra Purve, Mr Shivanand Tiwary, Mr Sakuni Chaudhary, Mr Shyam Rajak and Mr Jaiprakash Narain Yadav. Two brothers of the

Chief Minister, Subhash Yadav and Sadhu Yadav, too were present.

Mr Pandey submitted before the court that the matter of the income-tax returns filed by the Yadav couple was still subjudice before the tax department's tribunal. He further argued that the CBI's valuation of the property possessed by Mr Laloo Yadav was inflated and added that Mrs Rabri Devi owned the property on which she had paid income tax. It was not surprising that Mr Laloo Yadav and Mrs Rabri Devi in their tenures as the Chief Minister had property worth Rs 50 lakh, Mr Pandey submitted.

Opposing the bail petitions, Mr L R Ansari said that they had started filing their income-tax returns from 1996 following the notice issued by income-tax authorities after the fodder scam broke out. He stated that Mrs Rabri Devi had been operated in the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in 1991 and claimed that her income was Rs 3,000 only.

'BJP, RSS, CBI hand-in-glove'

RJD CHIEF Laloo Prasad Yadav today accused the BJP and the RSS of colluding with the CBI to liquidate the RJD.

Mr Yadav said both the BJP and RSS were trying to remove secular leaders from the mainstream.

Maintaining that he had full faith in the judiciary, he said this was the reason why he decided to surrender even without any summons.

Beur model jail, situated on the outskirts of the Capital town, resembled a village fair as hordes of people descended to have a look at the RJD president who would spend the next 14 days there.

The jail, which had the dubious distinction of having "guests" like dreaded outlaws and Independent MLAs Suraj Bhan Singh and Rajan Tiwari, was abuzz with the arrival of the "special guest" who has stayed in the jail on two previous occasions.

UNI, Patna

6 APR 2000

Allies mount pressure on Centre to retain subsidy bill

Our Political Bureau

NEW DELHI 26 APRIL

WHEN THE Lok Sabha discusses the price rise through the public distribution system on Thursday, the government will use all its persuasive prowess to ram in its point that it is time for using a good pair of scissors to prune untargeted and unintended subsidies.

That the government is under tremendous pressure was clear on Wednesday when its allies got together yet again and demanded a rollback on the hike in prices. The 45-minute meeting, attended by leaders of all the major allies, included Yerrannaidu (TDP), Sudip Bandhopadhyaya (Trinamul Congress),

Devendra Prasad Yadav (JD-U), Sushil Kumar Indora (INLD), Anant Gite (Shiv Sena) and Vaiko (MDMK).

The allies have demanded a total rollback of the PDS price rise and "reasonable" review of LPG and kerosene prices. "We will press for our demands inside and outside Parliament," Mr Yadav said. The allies have already submitted a memorandum to the government earlier in the current session.

However, support for government action on Wednesday came from the Associated Chamber of Commerce (Assocham) which has asked the government to resist pressure from political parties and not effect a rollback.

In a statement, Assocham said the Rs

2,892 crore cut in subsidies in the Budget was a drop in the ocean considering the total outgo of subsidies was Rs 22,800 crore in the current fiscal.

"The impact of reduction in subsidies reforms on the poor will be minimal as the total availability of grain to those below

ROLLBACK REQUEST

the poverty line has been doubled."

The report by the parliamentary standing committee on food and civil supplies apparently calling for a rollback on subsidies only served to highlight the growing dissonance on economic reforms within political parties. While making the case for a rollback, the committee admit-

ted PDS had not reached the target group, given the massive leakages in the system.

The government's argument for cutting subsidies in the first place was precisely that it failed to benefit the people it meant to. In fact, it can be reasonably assumed that the demand for rollback has less to do with the poor than with the better off sections of society.

According to the standing committee report, 1,917,330 bogus cards had been identified in the country, of which Andhra Pradesh (whose CM is at the vanguard of the protest) accounts for 300,000. Diversion of wheat from the PDS system to the black-market was 36 per cent and rice 31 per cent. Despite these findings however, the committee strongly recom-

ended resumption of subsidies.

Earlier this month, the finance minister had ruled out a rollback, making a distinction between subsidies for the poor and the "non-poor". "Populism should not be allowed to harm the economy. We have to show that the government has the courage to push through some hard measures," he told BJP MPs.

If the government stands firm on Thursday, the confidence in the government's desire to push through politically difficult second-generation reforms will be reaffirmed which will have an exponential effect on investors and industry alike. However, all of this is subject to crippling political pressure from both allies and Opposition.

INDIAN EXPRESS - Times

The Economic Times

27 APR 2000

Checks and balances

RECENT POLITICAL developments in Gujarat and Bihar can help in appreciating the truth that the country can only be governed effectively with the concurrence of the diverse elements that make up India. In the days of single party rule, such as that of the Congress, an effort was generally made to establish an intra-party consensus which in a multi-polar society virtually amounted to forging federal agreements on key issues. But the danger existed of a charismatic leader subordinating governance to personal aims, as during the Emergency. Now, in times of coalition politics, even the hint of a unidimensional agenda being imposed can spell trouble for the Centre. It is no longer feasible to ride roughshod on regional entities. At the same time, the local parties too cannot ignore the rest of India.

For instance, the BJP Government in Gandhinagar erroneously thought that it could change the rules of engagement in any manner it pleased. But the move concerning RSS membership for Government servants rebounded, since it echoed as much because of the Congress' opposition as of the BJP's own NDA allies which are regional parties. Without mincing words, the allies let the BJP know they could not back it on the RSS question. It is instructive to remember that the numerically dominant BJP at the Centre was forced to backtrack even after the Prime Minister and the Union Home Minister had voiced their support to their Gujarat colleagues.

The Bihar case did not concern ideology at all. It was nothing more than a bid for power by whatever means possible. Even so, Chandrababu Naidu articulated his displeasure about the claims of the largest single party being overlooked. Perhaps he was taking a rain check for the day he might be shabbily treated by a pliant Governor, but the point was worth making. Regional parties have reason to be sensitive about Article 356. In another context, while discussing a review of the Constitution, M. Karunanidhi, the DMK leader, said that while he had no objections, he would resist moves to curb the power of the States and anything that might prejudice the status of the minorities. Even if such views were not expressed in a concerted manner, they nevertheless act as a check on arbitrary and whimsical decisions.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

13 MAR 2000

Sop-laden population policy freezes LS seats

FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Feb. 15: The Centre today unveiled a three-pronged national population policy which offers a series of incentives by which the government expects to stabilise the growth rate by 2045.

As part of the project, the government is considering freezing the number of Lok Sabha seats till 2026 to give the states a free hand in implementing the population policy. For instance, Kerala, which has succeeded in controlling the growth rate, could feel aggrieved as it sends only 20 MPs to the Lok Sabha. The strength of each state in the Lower House depends on its population.

The government adopted the policy before the budget session as it is in a hurry to kick off the programme following predictions that the country's population would touch the billion mark on May 11. India's annual demographic growth rate is 15.5 million, which, the government believes, could "neutralise efforts to conserve available resources and

their environment".

"Stabilising population is an essential requirement for promoting sustainable development with more equitable distribution. However, it is as much a function of making reproductive health care accessible and affordable for all, as of increasing the provision and outreach of primary and secondary education," the government said while accepting the policy.

A National Commission on Population, with the Prime Minister at the chair, will be constituted to monitor the implementation of the plan. Every state will have its own population panel as well.

The policy has categorised its objectives under three heads: im-

mediate, medium-term and long-term. The immediate targets are addressing the needs of contraception and health infrastructure. Though the policy does not state as much, government sources indicated that funding for population projects could go up in the budget.

The medium-term objective is to ensure that the fertility graph plateaus by 2010. The long-term aim is stabilising the population by 2045.

The Centre, which has been pursuing a "target-free" approach since 1993-94, has offered a series of sops to promote the small-family norm. (See chart)

The programme has laid down 13 "national socio-demographic

goals" to be achieved by 2010. Among them are making school education free and compulsory up to the age of 14, reducing infant mortality rate to below 30 per 1,000 births, universal immunisation of children against all vaccine-preventable diseases, promoting delayed marriage for girls, preferably after they are 20, containing the spread of AIDS and communicable diseases, integrating Indian Systems of Medicine with reproductive and child health services, widespread access to counselling on contraception and making family-planning a people-centred programme.

For the 2010 target, the policy also focuses on 12 strategic "themes" that would serve as guidelines. The themes, to be elaborated in an action plan, will focus on "decentralised planning and empowering women for improved health and nutrition".

Apart from the Prime Minister, the population panel will include chief ministers and the Central minister in charge of family welfare. It will have as members demographers, public health professionals and NGO emissaries.

POP PILLS

- Financial incentives and other perks for exemplary performance.
- Rs 500 to be awarded to mothers who have their first child after 18.
- Cash incentive of Rs 500 after the birth of a girl.
- Financial incentives for women who have their first child after 21.
- Financial incentives for women who have their first child after 21.

'Panel must study foreign origin issue'

BAHADURGARH (Haryana), FEB. 17. The Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister and TDP leader, Mr. Chandrababu Naidu, today said that the issue of barring people of foreign origin from occupying top constitutional positions should be taken up by the newly set-up Constitution review panel.

"It is the biggest issue... Otherwise why we fought for freedom? So many people gave away their lives," he told reporters here before addressing a series of election meetings with the Haryana Chief Minister Mr. O. P. Chautala.

Pointing out that the issue was part of the NDA manifesto, he said, "we firmly believe that we are not inferior to anyone."

Referring to opposition to the Vajpayee Government move in setting up the panel, he said it would be erroneous to oppose such a move "just for the sake of it".

"I don't understand why and what the Congress people are fearing. After all, everything will come to Parliament and only two-third majority can take any decision." — PTI

THE HINDU
18 FEB 2000

Oppn. stalls proceedings in both Houses over RSS issue

The Times of India News Service

NEW DELHI: The budget session of Parliament got off to a stormy start on Thursday with a spirited opposition disrupting business in both Houses to protest against the Gujarat government's revocation of a ban on the participation of its employees in RSS activities.

The Congress-led opposition raised slogans and pressed for an adjournment motion on the issue. The noisy scenes resulted in adjournments in both Houses. When the Houses met again after lunch, the opposition, led by Sonia Gandhi, immediately demanded a discussion on the issue, forcing another round of adjournments.

As soon as the Lok Sabha met in the morning, the opposition members were on their feet, demanding that question hour be suspended and top priority be accorded to the RSS issue. For the first time since the NDA government came to power, the House

witnessed an unusual display of unity in opposition ranks.

Lok Sabha speaker G.M.C. Balayogi, however, rejected the motion, maintaining that the issue be taken up by the opposition after question hour. The opposition remained adamant, however, and SP, BSP and RJD members rushed into the well of the House demanding a ban on the organisation. They also chanted slogans such as 'RSS hatao, desh bachao'.

When efforts to restore order proved futile, the speaker adjourned the House for two hours.

In the Upper House, the demand for the suspension of question hour to discuss the RSS issue was not accepted by chairman Krishna Kant. As pandemonium prevailed, the House was adjourned. When the House met in the afternoon, Congress members wanted to know about the fate of their motion.

THE TIMES OF INDIA
25 FEB 2000

98 Scene
110-12

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2000

GAINING BY DEFAULT

THE BJP-LED National Democratic Alliance's grandiose vision of sweeping the Assembly polls in the politically significant States of Bihar, Haryana and Orissa — encouraged as it was by its impressive performance in the Lok Sabha elections four months ago — has failed to materialise in the way it had imagined. For one thing, the gloss on the solid victories that the coalition partners registered in Haryana and Orissa — retaining power in the former and wresting power from the Congress(I) in the latter — has been overshadowed by the BJP-Samata-JD(U) combine's lacklustre showing in the crucial State of Bihar, where Mr. Laloo Prasad Yadav's RJD turned in a performance defying all pollster predictions. In fact, the remarkable resilience of the RJD and the broad social coalition Mr. Laloo Yadav had crafted in the mid-1990s is arguably the most striking feature of the outcome of the latest round of Assembly polls. The NDA partners who were hoping to make it to the helm comfortably and with ease found themselves in the predicament of having to struggle to cross the halfway mark.

Secondly, in Haryana and Orissa, the fact that the BJP has not performed as well as have done its major partners, Mr. Naveen Patnaik's BJD and Mr. Om Prakash Chautala's INLD, should worry its leadership. Given that the party has tirelessly been flaunting the perceived popularity of the Prime Minister, Mr. A.B. Vajpayee, as its electoral trump card, this relatively poor showing cannot but be seen as a contra-indicator, even granting that the Assembly elections are fought mostly on local issues. In both the States, the key factors responsible for the NDA's success have more to do with the regional partners than with the BJP, apart of course from the weaknesses of its main rival, the Congress(I), and the decimation of Mr. Bansi Lal's HVP in Haryana. In a sense, their better showing accords with the preference the voters have of late been showing for regional outfits where

governance at the State level is in question. If the people of Orissa apparently saw Mr. Naveen Patnaik as the inheritor of his father, Biju Patnaik's political legacy, Mr. Chautala's strategy of going for a snap poll (over 16 months ahead of schedule) before anti-incumbency sentiments started assuming serious proportions would seem to have paid off in Haryana. It should come as no surprise if this disparity in performance level, which is bound to have its impact on the relationship between the BJP and its partners in these States, has its echo in the functioning of the NDA at the Centre, with the regional constituents seeking a greater clout and say.

From the standpoint of the Congress(I), the outcome has exposed yet again the parlous state of the party and, more importantly, the abject failure of its leadership to give a sense of direction to the organisation. In Orissa, it has not only lost power but has been sharply marginalised. It will not do for the party to seek refuge in such facile explanations as the 'anti-incumbency factor' heightened by the super-cyclone or, for that matter, draw comfort from the fact that it had improved on its performance, in terms of seats or its vote share, compared to the Lok Sabha elections, in one or the other of these States. The so-called efforts at rejuvenating the organisation and regaining the loyalties of the alienated sections of its erstwhile mass base have made little headway because these did not address the core issues and the party high command was not serious about the exercise. It is indeed tragic to see the Congress(I) — a nationalist party with a tradition spanning well over a century — unable to come to grips with the fast changing ground realities in this democratic polity and reposition itself in a manner that would enable it to play a lead role in combating the communal forces, which seem to be rapidly acquiring political space for want of a credible and potentially strong alternative.

THE HINDU
28 FEB 2000

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2000

A NEW APPROACH

g.p. Secome
10-10

THE CALL BY the Congress(I) president, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, to her partymen to agitate in the streets against the BJP-led Government's attempts to "spread communalism" and to "subvert the Constitution" marks a new assertiveness in the party's approach. The immediate context — the BJP-led dispensation's order in Gujarat to lift the ban on Government employees being members of the RSS — for embarking upon an agitational programme seems to suggest a realisation within the Congress(I), at long last, that it needs to play its role as the main opposition party. While it remains to be seen as to how long it takes for the Congress(I), as an organisation, to gear itself up to the new course and how far its ranks would be willing to go in this new direction, the party as such is left with no other option to revive itself. And it is clear that the party high command — Mrs. Sonia Gandhi — is convinced about the need for a break from the prevailing political culture of drawing room confabulations. It may be true that the protest march she led in the capital was only symbolic. But then, the fact of the Congress(I) president's participation, the first time ever since she took over the party, must convey some signals to the rank and file.

Indeed, the task set by the Congress(I) president is not all that simple. The agitation course, as and when it takes shape, will certainly have to go beyond what was witnessed in Delhi on the anniversary of the Mahatma's martyrdom. Rather than being occasions which those around Mrs. Sonia Gandhi could use to demonstrate their sycophancy to the leader, an agitation of the nature suggested by the Congress(I) president — to fill the jails until the Gujarat Government rescinded its order — will necessarily require a lot of effort. And the enormity of the task only increases in the case of a

party like the Congress(I), whose leaders at various levels have hardly had any exposure to the rough and tumble of agitational politics. That they needed to be virtually goaded by Mrs. Sonia Gandhi to break barricades — even if it was symbolic — clearly shows the inability of the senior leaders to assume any role other than swarming around the party president. This is the only means through which Mrs. Sonia Gandhi's call for an agitational course can be realised. And in such a course, there is hardly any scope for perpetuating the culture of follow-the-high-command. Instead, it is important that the party organisation be revived at all levels and the spirit of democracy infused in its functioning.

Be that as it may, the Congress(I)'s new line should assume significance not just in the context of the party's own future. Instead, any such course becomes significant in the larger political context too. After all, mobilisation of public opinion against any given move by the Government of the day and the right to express such dissent in public are integral to the strengthening of the democratic structure. And the issues involved in this context — the "decision" to set up a commission to "review" the Constitution and the order by the State Government in Gujarat — involve attempts to tamper with the fundamentals of the democratic civil society; hence, it is the imperative for all those on the other side of the BJP-led combine to mobilise opinion against such moves. And there cannot be a better means to resist the moves than availing of the public space to dissent and protest. And such a course, rather than the customary poll-eve tie-ups, would serve a better way for the coming together of such parties and groups opposed to the BJP-led combine's sectarian agenda in the long run.

THE HINDU
: 1 FEB 2000

The ISI bogey

By V. Krishna Ananth

“WHILE POLITICAL approximation may be a somewhat difficult and tardy matter, there is no reason why Pakistan and India should not jointly enter their teams for the various events at the World Olympics.”

Those in politics today can hardly afford to even refer to this statement, made by none other than that leading light of the Indian socialist movement, Ram Manohar Lohia, as early as in June 1952. Lohia could make this point in the course of a public speech in Hardoi (a small town in Uttar Pradesh).

A statement of this kind today, when even an India-Pakistan cricket match is turned into a war-like situation, is bound to be condemned and the speaker is likely to be labelled an agent of the ISI. And one does not have to wait for such fanatics as Mr. Bal Thackeray or Mr. Ashok Singhal and their ilk to react in such fashion. The Indian state itself has begun indulging in this project.

In the national political discourse today, one is urged to look for the ISI's hand anywhere and everywhere. The day is not far off when the hapless masses will be told that the ISI is involved in siphoning off foodgrains meant for the Public Distribution System, that the ISI is behind the poor quality of the grain supplied in the ration shops and that it is the ISI's game to dismantle whatever little health care and education facilities exist in the public sector in the country.

It is not the case here to portray the ruling dispensation in Pakistan — whether under Gen. Pervez Musharraf now or Mr. Nawaz Sharif until a few months earlier — as well-meaning saints. Nor can there be any illusion that the rulers of Pakistan now want to turn the heat on militants. How can Gen. Musharraf remain in the mercenaries just because the task for which they were put together — to dismantle the democratic structure in Afghanistan — has been “accomplished”?

And given this reality, it is the mandatory responsibility of the Indian state to

ensure that the games that these mercenaries are engaged in are scuttled. Those concerned with the democratic and secular social fabric cannot relish the thought of the Taliban trying to do to us what they managed to do with Najibullah and his regime in Afghanistan.

The trouble, however, is with the rhetoric that has come to dominate the political discourse in recent times in this connection. Take for instance an incident in Delhi about a month ago involving a

tan? In a similar vein was the report that the subversives depended on the public transport in Delhi to ferry the stuff from one end of the city to another.

Many members of the political class may not know that it only requires some rudimentary knowledge of physics and some locally-available material to put together a detonator. The Defence Minister, Mr. George Fernandes, will vouch for this. So will the personnel in the police and paramilitary forces. But then, when there

have resorted to such rhetoric and war mongering in times of crises in their own backyard. And such rhetoric is resorted to not just in India. The rulers in Pakistan too thrive on an anti-India rhetoric. After all, the BJP-led orchestration around Kar-gil would not have been possible without the Nawaz Sharif dispensation in Pakistan aiding the militants, with sophisticated arms and other accessories, to cross the LoC.

The adventure must have helped the rulers there to mute resistance at least for some time. It is this aspect that stares us in the face now in the context of the renewed vigour and thrust being put by our rulers into this campaign about the ubiquitous ISI. Through this campaign, the Vajpayees, the Advanis and the Fernandes have managed to sweep under the carpet any debate on why there has been an increase in the number of those living below the poverty line; from 34.88 crores in 1997 to 40.63 crores in 1998 (as reported by the National Sample Survey Organisation, Government of India).

Rather than initiating any meaningful measures to end this downside in the quality of living of the poor — using the 32 million tonnes of foodgrains now rotting in the FCI godowns — the ruling clique seem to have decided to feed the hapless millions with the ISI rhetoric and conjure up fears of an Islamic conspiracy to over-run our nation.

Indira Gandhi too tried this in the early Seventies and ended up putting the democratic structure on hold for a couple of years. The Congress(I) repeated the trick in the Eighties too when members belonging to a particular faith were presented as agents of forces bent upon destabilising our country. What is happening now is different in only one sense. Indira Gandhi and the Congress(I) were only able to put democracy on hold. The present dispensation with the large network of the RSS to back it and a definite ideological objective — to render India into a Hindu state — has the potential to lead the polity towards a bigger danger than what Indira Gandhi could between June 26, 1975, and March 1977.

In the national discourse today, one is urged to look for the ISI's hand anywhere and everywhere.

member of the staff in the Pakistan High Commission. He paid the term fees in the school where his ward studies just like any other parent and it so happened that there was a counterfeit note in the bundle. On being informed about that, he agreed to replace it; and as is the normal course, a case was registered in the local police station.

What was shocking was the manner in which this incident made news and one particular private TV channel had it in its headlines that a Pakistani mission staff was found involved in counterfeiting. And a couple of weeks after that, a news agency sought to club this incident with the recovery of huge amounts of counterfeit currency in the capital and reported with unquestioning certainty that pumping in huge amounts of fake notes is the means adopted by the ISI to fund its subversives.

Such small details as to whether at all a person would deliberately use a counterfeit note while paying his son's school fees, particularly if he is part of a conspiracy, did not occur to those reporting the incident. Then there are the reports, handed out recently by the Delhi police, of subversives having smuggled in detonators and such devices from across the border. While it is likely that explosives — RDX in particular — may have to be smuggled in from elsewhere, do detonators too have to be brought in from Pakis-

tan? In a similar vein was the report that the subversives depended on the public transport in Delhi to ferry the stuff from one end of the city to another.

It is not for the first time that rulers

27 killed in Manipur, Bihar polls

Nitish's chopper attacked

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, February 12

AT LEAST 27 people, including 14 securitymen and two presiding officers, were killed and several injured in Bihar and Manipur today as violence marred the first phase of polling in the two states which recorded between 60 and 70 per cent polling.

In Bihar, 21 people, including 12 securitymen and two presiding officers, were killed and several others injured as Naxalites perpetrated large-scale violence to execute their poll boycott call for the first phase elections for 108 Assembly seats, which recorded 55 to 60 per cent turnout.

Kaimur accounted for the maximum number of eight deaths, while Garhwa recorded four deaths and Nawada, Hazaribagh, Giridh and Palamu two each. Armed militants killed six people in Manipur where 60 to 70 per cent turnout was reported for the first phase polling for 27 Assembly seats.

Union Ministers Sharad Yadav and Nitish Kumar escaped unhurt when some rival political activists attacked their campaign helicopter at Rupauli on the Madhepura-Purnia border in Bihar on Saturday. Official sources said the chopper was damaged in the incident, but none was injured.

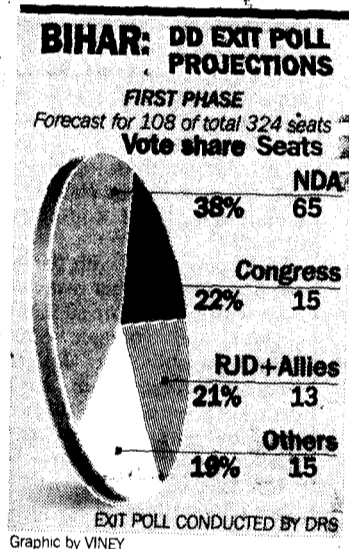
Briefing mediapersons, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) M S Gill said that nearly 60 per cent polling was reported in Bihar where elections were held in 135 constituencies. The violence was the result of "social and political turmoil" being witnessed over the years in some parts of the State, he added.

Among those killed were 12 policemen. Thirteen other cops were among those injured in the poll-related violence.

Describing today's poll in the

three-phase election for Bihar as the "most difficult of the phases", he expressed concern that casualties took place despite the best efforts of the Commission and the Government. "It is for political parties in particular to address this socio-political problem and resolve it once and for all as the Commission can play only a limited role," he said. Mr Gill commending the role of security forces, particularly the Bihar Police.

Mr Gill revealed that heavy



polling was reported from the Naga inhabited hilly areas of the State which were facing serious threat of boycott. Complimenting the Nagas and those manning the election process, he said this positive development has heralded the beginning of a new era in the State.

He said that repolling, wherever necessary, would be ordered only after the Commission received a detailed report.

Elaborate security arrangements were made in Bihar in view of apprehensions of large-scale violence.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

13 FEB 2000

RSS leaves it to government to decide over ban

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14/2
J. P. Sene
'We are not seeking revocation'

By Man Mohan

The Times of India News Service

NEW DELHI: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), under attack from opposition as well as ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners following several BJP-ruled states lifting the ban on government employees participating in its activities, on Sunday said that "it is up to the government to decide whether to lift the ban and that it is not seeking any revocation."

The controversy started after the BJP governments in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh lifted the ban on their staff participating in RSS activities. It took a serious turn when some NDA partners too expressed their reservations.

"Whether the ban is to be lifted or not and when to lift it would depend on the judgement of the government. It should be remembered that we have not sought lifting of the ban," RSS chief Rajendra Singh said in a statement in the Sangh's mouthpiece *Panchjanya*.

Describing the controversy as "unfortunate and not in the interest of the country," Mr Singh said the RSS' stand on the issue was vindicated by several court verdicts against the ban.

"It is unfortunate that some political parties are trying to politicise the issue," he said.

Clarifying his reported statement in this regard on Friday, Mr Singh said at the function organised by *Panchjanya*, he had given the example of Britain where all government employees except those in judiciary and the police were free to participate in the activities of not only in socio-cultural organisations like the RSS but also political parties.

The British example had been narrated to support his point of view and it was not his intention "to canvas for its implementation in India," he added.

In its 75-year history, he said, the RSS had "never taken any government or political patronage and grew despite opposition from the government." The ban on the RSS, which was started by the British,

continued even after Independence because of the "pseudo-secularism" propagated by successive governments, the RSS chief said.

The RSS had braved several governments since Independence and "the growth was mainly due to inherent strength of the Hindutva," Mr Singh pointed out.

According to him, the RSS had never attempted to build its image in the media since 50-60 years even in adverse situations. "Should the ban be lifted or not or its timing are issues to be left to the government," he said.

Recalling his conversation with mediapersons at a function relating to the *Panchjanya*, Mr Singh said he was of the view that "any ban on participation of the government servants in any organisation was bad."

Meanwhile, Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijay Singh has warned that any state employee or officer found participating in shakhas of the RSS would be dismissed. The chief minister, who addressed a number of election meetings at Rajim Vidhan sabha constituency on Saturday, alleged that both the BJP and the RSS were spreading communalism.

The Madhya Pradesh government would never allow such a thing to happen as long as he was chief minister of the state, Mr Digvijay Singh said.

THE TIMES OF INDIA
14 FEB 2000

NCP in bind over Sangma inclusion

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, February 14

9-PM seen HT-1

THE GOVERNMENT'S announcement of the 11-member Constitution review panel today drew flak from the Opposition parties even as the Nationalist Congress Party was thrown into confusion with its leader P.A. Sangma's acceptance of membership of the panel despite the party's rejection of the review exercise.

While the CPI condemned the appointment of the panel outright, the Congress made known its unhappiness over the Govt's whole approach on this issue. Senior Congress leader Pranab Mukherjee criticised the "open ended" terms of reference and said the government ought to take political parties into confidence.

Curiously enough, the NCP was caught on the wrong foot, following Mr Sangma's acceptance of the Government's invitation to serve on the panel. The party's Working Committee had adopted a resolution recently, terming the Constitution review plan "fraudulent and unfortunate". It had gone on to ask Mr Vajpayee to abandon the exercise.

Stumped by Mr Sangma's decision, the NCP circles today could not say how it would be dealing with the situation. All that party president Sharad Pawar would say for the moment was that he had had "some reservations" over Mr Sangma's membership of the panel. He said he would discuss the matter with Mr Sangma.

NCP sources said that Mr Sangma had joined the panel without consulting the party leadership. "This has baffled us," one functionary said.

Assailing the Government action, CPI general secretary A.B. Bardhan said the newly-appointed Commission "does not have any sanction of Parliament". "The argument that the Constitution is

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fifty year old and therefore needs a review, is a spurious one. If there is a need to amend any provision to address new issues and situations, Parliament can do it," he said.

That the Congress was not happy with the nomination of Mr Sangma and former MP Mrs Sumitra Kulkarni was made clear by Mr Pranab Mukherjee in Hyderabad.

At the party's regular Press briefing here, spokesman Anil Shastri described the manner the Government had gone about the appointments as "politically motivated and suspect".

Senior Congress leader Shiv Shankar commented that the panel did not inspire confidence despite having some "good people" as its members. Had the Government been serious about translating into reality the Constitutional ideals of equality and socio-politico-economic justice, it would have accorded adequate representation on the panel to social groups that have for long suffered the burden of poverty, hunger and ignorance.

While pointing out that the panel's sole woman member, Ms Sumitra Kulkarni, was aligned with the BJP, he said the backward classes have not been represented on the panel. Moreover, hasn't the Government been "politically motivated" in appointing Mr Sangma, the Congress' most vocal critic, he quizzed.

Without suggesting that the Panel members would allow themselves to be influenced, the Congress leader alleged that the Government has an agenda that it wants fulfilled.

As for Mr Sangma's remarks that the Commission would look into the question of barring citizens of foreign origin from holding high offices, spokesman Anil Shastri observed that the NCP leader was obviously unaware of his responsibilities.

Bihar seat-sharing accord chalked out by NDA partners

NEW DELHI: Helped by a last minute intervention by home minister L.K. Advani, BJP and its allies—Samata Party, Janata Dal (U) and Bihar People's Party (BPP)—on Sunday succeeded in hammering out a seat-sharing arrangement for the Bihar assembly elections capping a week of tough negotiations.

With just a day left for the filing of nominations for the first phase of polling in the state, BJP agreed to contest 150 seats, Samata Party 90, Janata Dal (United) 54 and Bihar People's Party 20.

The matter was resolved at a marathon five-hour meeting of leaders of these parties chaired by Mr Advani at his residence.

The home minister told reporters after the meeting that the four parties would soon identify the constituencies for the elections which would be fought on a common manifesto. Samata party president Jaya Jaitly, defence minister George Fernandes, JD (U) president Sharad Yadav and party colleague Ram Vilas Paswan and BPP president Anand Mohan—present at the press conference—agreed to abide by the seat-sharing accord.

On the question of projecting a chief ministerial candidate, Mr Advani said, "No decision has been taken on it although each of the allies had its own candidate."

Apparently, seeking to pacify the allies which had taken umbrage under BJP's earlier retort—that no Union minister should aspire for chief ministership—Mr Advani said, "There was no bar on central ministers aspiring for this post."

The talks between the NDA partners had been stalled over the issue of seat sharing due to sharp differences between Samata and JD (U).

Even though the BJP had identified more than 200 seats where it claimed to be in a position to defeat RJD, climbed down and decided to contest 150 seats.

With Samata and JD(U) de-

manding an equal number of seats, the talks failed to make any headway despite two rounds of discussions with Mr Advani. Subsequently, all the partners on Sunday morning agreed to authorise Mr Advani to iron out a solution and that they would abide by his decision.

Asked whether any criteria was followed for the distribution of seats, Mr Advani said, "We have not adopted any criteria for the distribution of seats but it was agreed that whatever the decision is taken at the meeting, all the parties would abide by it." To a question whether the solution hammered out at this meeting was acceptable to Samata

Party, Mr Fernandes said, "We all accept the decision."

Earlier, JD(U) president Sharad Yadav said his party too had given Mr Advani the authority to take a decision and it would be acceptable to them.

The talks had been bogged down mainly because of the seats demanded by Samata and JD(U), which had hampered BJP from announcing its list of candidates.

Samata president Jaya Jaitly had met BJP president Kushabhau Thakre

as also Mr Fernandes and sought the party's assistance in resolving this vexed issue. (PTI)

Nitish Kumar sore over Samata's share of seats

The Times of India News Service

PATNA: Union agriculture minister and senior Samata Party leader Nitish Kumar has expressed his disappointment over the number of seats allotted to the Samata Party under the agreement hammered out in Delhi. Mr Kumar said that injustice had been done to his party. "Since we initiated this policy of bringing anti-Laloo forces into one fold there is nowhere we can lodge our complaint," he said, while speaking to newsmen at his residence in Patna on Sunday. Despite hectic political activities going on in Delhi, Mr Kumar has kept himself confined to the state.

NDA wrangling still continues

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, JAN. 27. With the last date for withdrawing nominations for the first phase of Bihar Assembly elections (108 seats) coming to an end, it is now certain that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners will fight against one other.

After several rounds of negotiations to identify the seats each of them should contest under the agreement which was hammered out last Sunday in the presence of the Union Home Minister, Mr. Lal Krishna Advani, the NDA partners have succeeded in identifying only 208 out of the 324 seats.

While the BJP general secretary, Mr. M. Venkaiah Naidu, claimed that the differences have narrowed down, the JD(U) spokesman, Mr. M. Raghupathy, admitted that talks were still on to resolve differences on 116 seats.

Chances of an agreement appear remote with the JD(U) and the Samata Party accusing each

other of adopting an intransigent stand. "From our side there is no intransigence and we are keen on saving the alliance (NDA). But the Samata is not cooperating by staking claim to seats held by JD (U)", Mr. Raghupathy said.

The Samata Party president, Mrs. Jaya Jaitley, however, refuted the allegation and said that "we too can level the same allegation against JD (U) but we don't indulge in mudslinging as we have to work together". She said the Samata had fielded 45 candidates for the first phase and some would either withdraw or retire.

At another level, differences between the BJP and the Biju Janata Dal continued over seat-sharing for the Assembly election scheduled in Orissa in the third week of February. While the BJD insisted that it would contest 100 of the 147 seats, the State BJP accused the BJD of adopting an inflexible approach.

Orissa, Bihar headaches: Page 9

Seat-sharing formula worked out in Orissa

NDA close to united fight against Laloo

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, January 29

AFTER BURNING the midnight oil for the past several days, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners were tonight on the point of sorting out the confusion over seat-sharing in Bihar in order to put up a united fight against Mr Laloo Yadav's RJD. However, one of the minor partners, Mr Anand Mohan's Bihar People's Party was still causing hiccups to the NDA.

While the final round of negotiations was still in progress for Bihar, the NDA managed to reach an agreement for the Orissa polls. The BJD, according to an announcement by BJP spokesman M. Venkaiah Naidu this afternoon, would contest 84 of the Orissa seats and the BJP 63 seats.

For resolving the Bihar row, a marathon meeting was still on among the allies tonight. As of 10 pm, identification of 316 of the 324 seats for distribution among the four partners had reportedly been completed.

Under the seat-sharing ratio agreed upon last Sunday, the BJP is to contest 150 seats, the Samata Party 90, the Janata Dal (U) 64 and the Bihar People's Party 20. But the BPP till late this evening remained somewhat unreconciled to this offer.

Prior to the final round of negotiations, BJP general secretary K.N. Govindacharya expressed his confidence about resolving the prevailing confusion in toto so that a united fight could be waged against the RJD.

By the afternoon, the Janata Dal (United) and the Samata Party had more or less ironed out their differences over seat identification. At finance minister Yashwant Sinha's residence last night, the two warring socialist outfits reportedly settled their claims.

On Saturday, the venue shifted to the residence of defence minis-

J-P. Seene
ter George Fernandes.

Samata president, Ms Jaya Jaitly, said the damage already done to the NDA's collective prospects by positioning competitive candidates in about 30 seats will be settled by asking the candidates who are to be axed to "retire honourably". Those who turn obstinate will be denied support in terms of campaign funds and material. "We will announce from rooftops if necessary to clear the confusion about who is the official NDA candidate".

In respect of Orissa, the BJP and the BJD agreed to make their respective performance in the recently held Lok Sabha polls as

Sonia's march

CONGRESS PRESIDENT Sonia Gandhi along with working committee members would march to the Prime Minister's house on Sunday morning in a move to pressurise the BJP-ruled Gujarat Government to withdraw its order permitting government employees to join the RSS. The party has already warned the Centre that it would resort to agitational programmes if this order is not revoked.

Cong objects to temple plan: P 9

the yardstick to determine the seat share for the Assembly elections. With this norm, it was decided that the BJP would contest 63 seats and the BJD 84 seats, BJP general secretary M. Venkaiah Naidu told newsmen. In the Lok Sabha polls, the BJP had won nine seats and the BJD 12 seats.

Mr Naidu claimed that all major irritants between the two parties have been removed.

"We will go to the people together and we are confident that we will sweep the polls," Mr Naidu said.

The BJP spokesman, however, sidestepped questions on the issue of Chief Ministership.

*Agitated BJD
workers stone
Naveen's house*

HT Correspondent
Bhubaneswar, January 29

ANGERED OVER the party leadership's decision to accept the seat-sharing formula "dictated" by the BJP, workers of the Biju Janata Dal today staged a noisy demonstration and pelted stones at the residence of BJD president Naveen Patnaik here.

A massive crowd of protestors shouted slogans against Mr Patnaik and other senior leaders for having "betrayed" them by accepting the BJP's terms for contesting the polls together.

Demonstrators had gathered outside Mr Patnaik's residence since early in the morning, even as the party leaders congregated there for discussing the seat-sharing issue. Late in the afternoon, when reports about the BJD president having agreed to the seat-sharing formula started circulating, the workers and ticket-seekers began shouting slogans against the party leaders for yielding to the BJP's diktats without a fight.

Party workers kept up their protest till late in the evening. "They have let us down very badly. The BJP has no party network here. Our workers, on the other hand, have been strengthening the party's roots for the last so many years. Their aspirations have received a major setback. This is going to lead to big trouble for the BJD. There will be rebel candidates everywhere and the major beneficiary would be the Congress," said an angry demonstrator.

The two partners have been discussing the issue of sharing of seats in the state for about a fortnight now. The BJD had initially contended that it would contest 120 seats and let the BJP contest the remaining 27 seats in the state.

The BJP, at the same time, was demanding that there should be a "fifty-fifty" arrangement for seat-sharing in the Assembly seats.

Later, the BJP decided that the ratio should be according to their agreement during the LS polls. The BJD had contested from 12 parliamentary constituencies while the BJP contested from nine seats. As per this agreement, the BJP would get to contest 63 seats while the BJD would get 84 seats.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

30 JAN 2000

NDA sews up Bihar poll pact, but Anand sulks

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, January 30

31/1

THE NATIONAL Democratic Alliance's three major constituents for the Bihar polls today sorted out their seat-sharing problems, but failed to bring round the fourth partner, Mr Anand Mohan's Bihar People's Party (BPP).

Striking a rebellious posture and causing a setback to NDA unity, Mr Anand Mohan conveyed his unhappiness to the Prime Minister and virtually served an "ultimatum" on withdrawal from the NDA front if his party did not get the constituencies of its choice.

A minor partner in the front, the BPP has been allocated 20 seats as against 150 for the BJP, 90 for the Samata Party and 64 for the JD(U) under the seat-sharing pact. The low number apart, Mr Anand Mohan is also upset over the failure to contest the seats of his party's choice.

Mr Anand Mohan stayed away from today's joint press conference where the list allocating the 324 seats to the four

parties was released. The list bore signatures of only three parties: BJP vice-president Kailashpati Mishra, Samata and JD(U) presidents Jaya Jaitly and Sharad Yadav, respectively.

Mr Mishra and JD(U) leader Ram Vilas Paswan had earlier made a last ditch bid to get Mr Anand Mohan to sign the document, but failed in their efforts. Nonetheless, Mr Mishra expressed the hope that the BPP leader would reconsider his decision in order to end "Laloo Yadav's jungle raj".

Mr Anand Mohan said that he would announce his course of action in Patna tomorrow after holding consultations with his partymen. The NDA's list had apparently been finalised after he had "walked out" of the meeting at Mr George Fernandes' residence around 3 am today. His protest came about when the JD(U) claimed the Saharsa seat in N Bihar which was once held by his wife, Lovely Anand.

At the BJP's Press briefing, party spokesman M. Venkaiah Naidu was hopeful that Mr Anand would be persuaded to

remain in the NDA in the light of JD(U) president Sharad Yadav giving up his party's claims over the Saharsa seat, subsequent to Mr Mohan's walk-out.

The BJP is the only NDA constituent to have announced the candidates for all the 150 seats it will be fighting. The party named 26 candidates belonging to the SCs, 17 from the STs, 10 women and three minorities. The sitting MLAs of Khijri and Kanke have been dropped.

The other NDA partners will be finalising their candidates over the next few days. Mr Kailashpati Mishra said the joint manifesto will be released on Feb 3. It has been agreed that there will be a joint campaigning, and if victorious, the NDA will settle the CM issue "amicably".

During the day, the BJP also released names of 24 candidates for Haryana. Mr M. Venkaiah Naidu said talks are in progress for six more seats which the BJP hopes to get from its partner, the INLD. In the list, the BJP has dropped three sitting MLAs - Mr Ganeshilal (Sirsa), Mr Fakir Chand Agarwal (Ambala City) and Mr Sishi Pal (Karnal).

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

31 JAN 2000