

George back with deputy in South Block

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Oct. 15. - Mr George Fernandes today returned to the Cabinet as defence minister and got back his former deputy, Mr Harin Pathak, too.

Mr Fernandes had resigned in March after the Tehelka expose and Mr Pathak had quit after being chargesheeted in a murder case. But today, the "old socialist" Fernandes, didn't seem bothered about moral and ethical issues.

That the Centre is no longer treating the Tehelka expose as an issue became apparent when the former BJP president, Mr Bangaru Laxman, was inducted into the Rajya Sabha committee on housing. Though the charges against Mr Fernandes were indirect, Mr Laxman was seen taking money in the tapes.

The Prime Minister said there was no case against Mr Fernandes in the Tehelka expose and he had resigned on his own. The Venkataswami Commission too hadn't found anything incriminating against Mr Fernandes and even the commission's notice to him didn't relate to any charges.

After Mr Fernandes was sworn in, Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee said the nation needed a full-fledged defence minister because of the changing security situation. The foreign minister, Mr Jaswant Singh, who held the defence portfolio too, was unable to bear the burden of two vital ministries, Mr Vajpayee said.

While some Samata Party leaders claimed that Mr Fernandes was given hints about his reinduction in August, the rehabilitation move gained momentum after he met the home minister, Mr LK Advani early this month, officials said. The two leaders then met the Prime Minister.

Some BJP leaders said Mr Fernandes could become potentially dangerous for the government if kept out of it for a long period, especially with coalition leaders like the Janata Dal (U) leader, Mr Sharad Yadav, sulking and Mr Vajpayee toying with the idea of reviving the Ayodhya cell. The BJP today put up a brave face on Mr Fernandes' reinduction, though it couldn't defend its earlier stand that Mr Fernandes would be inducted only after clearance from the Venkataswami Commission.

MISSING CHAIRS

NEW DELHI, Oct. 15. - 11.15 a.m.: four chairs at the "new ministers' enclave", at Rashtrapati Bhavan suggested four ministers would be sworn in.

11.30 a.m.: two chairs removed, meaning no room in the ministry for Miss Mamata Banerjee and her partyman, Mr Sudip Bandopadhyay in.

Later, Trinamul leaders quoted their chief as having said that she was likely to join the government.

Was it a mistake on the part of the President's office, or were last-minute changes introduced because Miss Banerjee had reportedly refused to take any portfolio other than railways or rural development? Officials said both were possible. - SNS

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THE STATESMAN

16 OCT 2002

Black day for democracy, says Cong.

By Our Special Correspondent

9 - counsel of minister

NEW DELHI, OCT. 15. The return of Mr. George Fernandes and Mr. Hiren Pathak to the Union Cabinet has evoked outright condemnation from the Opposition. The Congress, the Left parties and the former Solicitor-General, Mr. Devendranath Dwivedi, assailed the Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, for "displaying a wanton disregard for political propriety."

Having failed in its bid to pre-empt the return of Mr. Fernandes, the Opposition was unsparing in its criticism. It laid the blame at Mr. Vajpayee's door, questioning his motives and accusing him of having lost all moral credibility. "Today is a black day in the history of Indian democracy and we hold the Prime Minister responsible for this," said the Congress spokesman, Mr. Jaipal Reddy.

The Opposition parties accused Mr. Vajpayee of disregarding the Venkataswami Commission it had set up and of trying to convert himself into the "nation's grand jury." Mr. Reddy said "Mr. Vajpayee has shown more cynical disregard for political morality than any Prime Minister in independent India".

The CPI(M) said the BJP-led Government had lost all credibility and the move to re-induct Mr. Fernandes was taken under pressure. "This exposed the opportunistic nature of the NDA," said the party politburo. The CPI national secretary, Mr. D. Raja, said the re-induction had "betrayed the Government's own position as the Venkataswami Commission was yet to complete its probe."

The Government was also sharply rebuked by Mr. Dwivedi. He said Mr. Vajpayee had committed a "Himalayan blunder" and "disfigured the Cabinet system." "It is gross con-

tempt for the judicial process and a step towards the privatisation of the public realm," he said.

Mr. Dwivedi said Mr. Fernandes as Defence Minister had violated and subverted ministerial responsibility by allowing his official residence to be used by his party president to dispense favours. This amounted to "public immorality of the highest order," exposing the office of Defence Minister to "possible blackmail by the enemies of the country."

Mr. Amar Singh of the Samajwadi Party saw little reason in the Prime Minister's decision. "If Mr. Fernandes was innocent, why was he made to resign in the first place?" he asked.

Support for Mr. Fernandes came from the Bharatiya Janata Party. Almost in one voice, the party leaders said the current global situation demanded a man of his capability and experience to head the sensitive Ministry.

Mrs. Maya Singh, BJP general secretary, said that in the present difficult situation, Mr. Fernandes could contribute towards thinking through and formulating a strategy for India. "We cannot afford to sit back, we need to remain alert, and Mr. Fernandes, with his capability and experience, could certainly contribute a great deal in a situation that was sensitive," she said.

Other party leaders said there was no "charge" against Mr. Fernandes and therefore "no moral question" was involved.

'No direct involvement'

By Our Special Correspondent

CHENNAI, OCT. 15. The DMK president, Mr. M. Karunanidhi, defended the induction of his long-time friend and NDA convener, Mr. Ge-

orge Fernandes, into the Union Cabinet, saying he had no direct involvement in the charges of bribery in defence deals brought up against him.

The DMK chief said the parties which justify the AIADMK leader Ms. Jayalalitha's appointment as Chief Minister despite her three-year conviction in corruption cases were now opposing the reinduction of Mr. Fernandes.

But even then, the NDA convener had owned moral responsibility and quit his post following the Tehelka expose, he noted.

Our Hyderabad Special Correspondent writes:

The Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, Mr. N. Chandrababu Naidu, has declined to comment on the re-induction of Mr. George Fernandes, into the Union Cabinet.

"What is there for me to react. The Prime Minister has taken him back," he said tersely when presspersons sought his comment at a Cabinet briefing. He parried questions on the propriety of it or the Telugu Desam Parliamentary party leader, Mr. K. Yerran Naidu's reported comment that the TDP had no objection to Mr. Fernandes' return to the Vajpayee Government.

Our Patna Special Correspondent writes:

The RJD president, Mr. Laloo Prasad Yadav, said he was appalled at the "hasty reinduction of Mr. Fernandes ignoring the Venkataswami Commission's finding that the Tehelka tapes were original and not doctored."

PTI reports:

In Kolkata, the Trinamool Congress chief, Ms. Mamata Banerjee, expressed happiness over the re-induction of Mr. Fernandes and said he was the best choice for the Defence Ministry.

THE HINDU

16 OCT 2002

CABINET EXPANSION TODAY

Fernandes is the right person for Defence: Jaswant

By Neena Vyas

9. Council of ministers

NEW DELHI, OCT. 14. There seems to be a strong probability of the Samata Party leader, Mr. George Fernandes, getting back the Defence Minister's job tomorrow despite the recent comment of the Venkataswami Commission that the Tehelka tapes were genuine. The other contender for the Defence portfolio is the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission and Centre's interlocutor in Kashmir, Mr. K.C. Pant.

Besides, the second man who is expected to be inducted is Mr. Harin Pathak, formerly Minister of State for Defence, who was forced to resign after a chargesheet was framed against him in a criminal case. But he has been acquitted since then.

Although no one was sure who would be inducted into the Cabinet tomorrow when the small but significant swearing-in takes place, Bharatiya Janata Party sources were of the view that Mr. Fernandes would be taken back in the job from which he had to resign following the Tehelka scandal.

Talking to a television channel today, Mr. Jaswant Singh, External Affairs Minister who holds the additional charge of Defence, praised Mr. Fernandes as the

"right person to take over the responsibility (of Defence) in the present circumstances." From Agra, Mr. Venkaiah Naidu, Minister for Rural Development, strongly criticised opposition parties for making loud noises about Mr. Fernandes being tainted by Tehelka. His view was that the opposition had no moral right to talk like this as during the previous regimes many tainted persons were holding Cabinet positions.

Other leaders of the BJP who did not want to be identified were also of the view that "Mr. George Fernandes was expected to be inducted as the Defence Minister tomorrow, although we cannot be sure."

Although it seems that there is some opposition to this move within the BJP, the calculation could be that Mr. Fernandes would be more dangerous for the stability of the National Democratic Alliance Government if left outside than when inside. On the other hand, there are some senior Cabinet Ministers who will not at all be comfortable with the reinduction of Mr. Fernandes.

There is also some speculation on a possible change in the portfolios of some Ministers, including Mr. Sharad Yadav and Mr. Shahnawaz Hussain. Mr. Yadav,

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who is known to be against the labour reforms being contemplated by the Government may be given some other portfolio — and he was known to be unhappy when he was shifted out from Civil Aviation to Labour in the last induction and reshuffle — and Mr. Hussain may also be shifted out of Civil Aviation as a result of the recent hoax hijack.

Apparently, Mr. Yadav met the Prime Minister yesterday over some other matter. Reports suggest that he was asked by the Prime Minister whether he would like to be moved out of Labour to some other ministry to which Mr. Yadav is believed to have responded by saying it was entirely his prerogative.

Trinamool stand

PTI reports from Kolkatta:

The Trinamool Congress has strongly advocated the reinduction of Mr. George Fernandes into the Union Cabinet.

"I have heard that the (Venkataswami) commission probing the Tehelka expose had not found any evidence against Mr. Fernandes... I will be happy if he returns (to the Cabinet)," the Trinamool Congress chief, Ms. Mamata Banerjee, told newsmen today.

OPPOSITION TO FERNANDES' REINDUCTION

PM yet to decide on Defence Minister

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By Harish Khare

NEW DELHI, OCT. 13. The Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, has yet to make up his mind on who should be his full-time Defence Minister, even though the swearing-in ceremony of the new entrant(s) to the Council of Ministers is scheduled to take place on Monday. The Prime Minister is reported to have come to the conclusion that the Minister for External Affairs, Mr. Jaswant Singh, should no longer be burdened with the additional responsibility of the Defence portfolio.

The choice before the Prime Minister is to reinduct the Tehel-

ka-tainted-but-not-yet-exonerated Mr. George Fernandes in his old job at the Defence Ministry or to ask the seasoned Mr. K.C. Pant, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, to move to the South Bloc from the Yojana Bhavan.

The major problem in the Pant choice is that he would have to be elected to Parliament, and there seems to be no immediate vacancy in either the Lok Sabha or the Rajya Sabha. The only Lok Sabha election due in the near future is the Guna constituency, but Mr. Pant can hardly be expected to take his chances against the

young Mr. Jyotiraditya Scindia, who should win the seat hands-down against any opponent. As far as the Rajya Sabha is concerned, the BJP would have to ask one of its sitting members either in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh or Himachal Pradesh to resign to create a vacancy for Mr. Pant to contest and be reasonably sure of making it to the Upper House. Ideally, Mr. Pant should contest from his home State, Uttar Pradesh.

Though the Pant camp has observed a very becoming silence about the Deputy Chairman's prospects, it is widely believed

that the speculation about Mr. Fernandes being reinducted emanated from the Yojana Bhavan corner. According to sources, the Prime Minister had taken note of the sharp and adverse reaction to the Mr. Fernandes-as-Defence-Minister idea from the Opposition parties. Mr. Fernandes had a 30-minute meeting with Mr. Vajpayee today.

The general view is that the Government's image would take a definite beating if the Prime Minister is seen as succumbing to pressure tactics by the Samata Party. Till such time as Mr. Fernandes gets exonerated, hopefully, by the Venkataswami Commission of Inquiry, his return to the Defence Ministry would be seen as a retreat from the BJP's stance of "su-raj".

However, though Mr. Vajpayee is aware of the moral judgment involved, he is also reported to be keen on using Mr. Fernandes' services for his administration. The ideal solution could be that should Mr. Pant be finally given the charge of Defence, Mr. Fernandes could take his place as the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, a position that carries with it the status and rank of Cabinet Minister.

Nonetheless, Mr. Vajpayee is expected to continue weighing the pros and cons till Monday morning, evaluating the adverse political opinion to Mr. Fernandes' return to the Defence Ministry and the nature of damage that the convener of the National Democratic Alliance can cause to the Government.

Keep him out: Cong., Left

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, OCT. 13. In a concerted move, the Opposition parties today sought to stall the return of Mr. George Fernandes to the Union Cabinet, by demanding that his return be kept in abeyance till the Venkataswami Commission completes its inquiry.

Reacting to reports on his possible re-induction, the Congress, the CPI(M) and the CPI denounced the 'move' as a brazen violation of public conduct.

The Congress accused the Government of playing a 'cruel joke' on the nation the same day the Venkataswami Commission had rejected the Samata Party's plea and had ruled that the Tehelka tapes were genuine. The Commission had conclusively established that bribes were received in the residence of Mr. Fernandes when he was Defence Minister, the party spokesperson, Mr. Jaipal Reddy, said and demanded that instead of reinstating Mr. Fernandes an FIR must be filed against him.

The Congress came down hard on the Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, accusing him of

"shamelessly and openly surrendering to pressure" from the allies. Its spokesperson, Mr. Jaipal Reddy, said that the induction of Mr. Fernandes would pose a serious challenge to the democratic system, besides being an insult to the Venkataswami Commission which was still conducting the probe.

The CPI(M) politburo joined in the criticism saying that Mr. Fernandes was being investigated by a judicial commission for charges of "bribe-taking", including an episode which took place in his house, involving the Samata Party chief at that time. The move "was a brazen disregard for propriety and the Government's own stand that it would like to get to the bottom of the Tehelka tapes issue". This would be another cynical blow to the public resolve to check corruption in high places," it said.

The CPI central secretariat too deplored the reported move. Any move to bring back Mr. Fernandes into the Cabinet would be against the assurance given by the Government to wait till the Commission cleared him.

THE HINDU

Jaswant in line of fire, Pant on standby

FROM RADHIKA RAMASESHAN AND KAY BENEDICT

New Delhi, Sept. 24: Jaswant Singh's reiterations that India is ready to offer "total and unconditional" support to the US in its Afghan offensive have not gone down well with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the BJP leadership and the RSS.

BJP sources said Jaswant might have to pay a price for "jumping the gun" by giving up one of the two portfolios he is holding — defence and external affairs. He is likely to lose the defence portfolio, they added.

Jaswant himself indicated in an informal chat with foreign ministry officials that he might relinquish the defence portfolio.

But sources in the external affairs ministry insisted that the remarks were



made in a "light-hearted" manner and had been "torn out of context".

BJP sources said while Jaswant had ruffled the parivar's feathers,

their leaders and the Prime Minister also felt that it was not "practical" for one person to handle two portfolios that require full-time attention.

The Congress has already said the defence ministry could not be treated as a "part-time" job. BJP sources said K.C. Pant, the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission and the adviser on Kashmir, could replace Jaswant. Pant has served as defence minister earlier.

Human resources development minister Murlu Manohar Joshi's backers are working overtime to get him the job.

But Pant is ahead, not merely because of experience. The other factor going in his favour was the view that if George Fernandes has to be reinstated in the Cabinet once he is cleared in the Tehelka case, Pant could be dispensed with more easily than a political heavyweight like Joshi.

But the Samata Party is upset as it believes that appointing a new defence minister now might eliminate the chances of Fernandes' early return to the government.

THE TELEGRAPH

25 SEP 2001

If you don't want good people to lie, don't ask inconvenient questions'

Angry Jagmohan takes over

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE & UNI

NEW DELHI, Sept. 3. - An angry and disappointed Mr Jagmohan took charge of tourism today after being persuaded by the Prime Minister's emissaries not to quit the Cabinet.

Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee's assurance that he would get charge of the culture ministry also reportedly helped him change his mind. The Archaeological Survey of India comes under the culture ministry, and that is bad news for encroachers of monuments across the country, especially Tughlaqabad Fort in the capital where the minister played a key role in clearing encroachments and beautifying the fort.

Mr Jagmohan, however, did not make this news public at the press conference he held

this evening where he only announced that he was staying back. He did not say he was happy to get tourism or that he did not mind the change of guard. But when questions on the subjects persisted, he said: "If you don't want good people to lie, don't ask inconvenient questions."

The rumours regarding his plans to quit were not baseless. He had the government on tenterhooks for a larger part of yesterday and today. Soon after day one (Saturday) of the reshuffle, Mr Jagmohan met Mr Vajpayee and Mr LK Advani to convey his disappointment at the change.

He spoke to them again and Mr Jaswant Singh on Sunday. But he refused to provide details of the "confidential" talks, saying it was against his

principles.

As reports of his decision to quit spread within the government, he received calls from Mr Singh, Mr Murli Manohar Joshi (today), the principal secretary to the Prime Minister, Mr Brajesh Mishra, and newly appointed minister of state in the PMO, Mr Vijay Goel, who finally persuaded him.

When he was the urban development minister, Mr Jagmohan made more powerful enemies than friends among traders, city politicians and encroachers for taking a "hard line" against unauthorised constructions and encroachment. On several occasions, he disregarded the political implications of his stand which stood in the way of "good governance". For instance when he opposed the regularisation of ille-

gal industries because it would amount to rewarding people for breaking laws. Or allowing status quo in case of the posh unauthorised colony, Sainik Farms.

Mr Jagmohan's successor, Mr Ananth Kumar, said he would take a "fresh view" of Sainik Farms, be "forward looking and caring" and go by the dictum "continue and change".

He warned land grabbers and encroachers here that the drive launched against them by Mr Jagmohan would continue and there will be no reprieve for those violating the law.

Mr Kumar, who met Mr Jagmohan this morning, praised him for initiating several "model schemes" and said these would continue. "Mr Jagmohan performed brilliantly and set up a model which will be

continued," he added.

"If the land mafia thinks they can get away with violating the law, I can only pity them. The law will be upheld and any misgivings on this count are baseless," he said.

Mr Kumar, who has been part of the hospitality industry - first as civil aviation minister and then tourism minister - said his motto would be "development and progress with a smile". He did not, however, explain the motto, especially in the context of the urban development ministry and in a country where, as Mr Jagmohan often said, the people lack civic values and respect for law.

Mr Kumar said he would not be as involved as his predecessor in Delhi's affairs. "I have to look after the entire country," he said.

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4 SEP 2001

MESSAGE FOR ANTI-REFORMERS; CHANCE FOR 'NEW' GENERATION

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9. Council of Ministers

Paswan, Sharad Yadav shifted

By Harish Khare 2/9

NEW DELHI, SEPT. 1. In a half-hearted reshuffle exercise, the Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, today inducted six new faces into his Council of Ministers while five colleagues were shown the door, and two Ministers of State were elevated to the Cabinet rank. The portfolios of several Ministers have also been changed.

Mr. Vajpayee's Cabinet is now 76 strong. The Prime Minister described today's exercise as an attempt to give the "new generation" a chance to prove itself. The reshuffle of portfolios is also seen as an attempt to kick-start the economic reforms process once again.

The President, Mr. K. R. Narayanan, administered the oath of office to the new entrants — two Cabinet Ministers and four Ministers of State — as well as to the two who were elevated to the Cabinet rank, at a simple ceremony at the Rashtrapati Bhavan this evening.

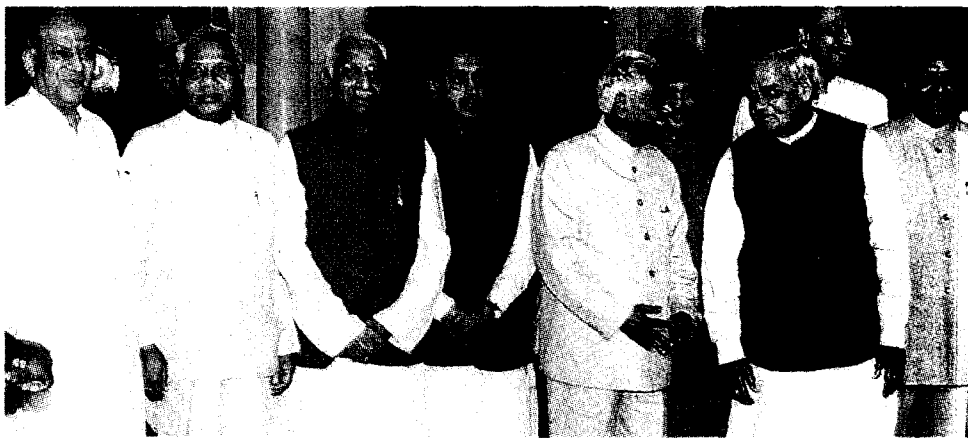
Among those who have been axed and whose resignations have been accepted by the President, include Mr. Sunderlal Patwa, and four Ministers of State — Mr. Debendra Pradhan, Mr. Chaoba Singh, Mr. Jaisingh Rao Patil Gaikwad, and Mr. Sriram Chauhan.

Civil Aviation for Shahnawaz

The two new Cabinet Ministers are Mr. Karla Munda (Agro and Rural Industries) and Mr. Ved Prakash Goyal (Shipping); Mr. Arun Shourie gets promoted as Cabinet Minister but continues to remain in charge of the disinvestment portfolio. Syed Shahnawaz Hussain was promoted as Cabinet Minister and assigned the Civil Aviation portfolio.

Mr. Hussain, who is only 32 years old, is probably the youngest Cabinet Minister since Independence. More importantly, his elevation corrects one of the most poignant anomalies in the Vajpayee Government — the absence of a Muslim in the Cabinet.

Also, the Prime Minister has effected a change of portfolios with the intention of sending a message that those Ministers not in sympathy with the logic and politics of the economic reforms process, could not expect



The President, Mr. Narayanan, and the Prime Minister, Mr. Vajpayee, with the newly sworn-in Ministers (L to R) Mr. M.K. Anna Saheb Patil, Mr. Karla Munda, Mr. Ved Prakash Goyal, Mr. Vijay Goel, Syed Shahnawaz Hussain, Mr. Rajiv Pratap Rudi, and Mr. Ravi Shankar Prasad, in New Delhi on Saturday. — Photo: S. Arneja

to preside over key economic ministries. Consequently, Mr. Sharad Yadav loses the Civil Aviation portfolio while Mr. Ram Vilas Paswan has to move out of the Sanchar Bhavan; both were reluctant reformers and both resisted the change till the last. Mr. Yadav now gets Labour while Mr. Paswan will preside over Coals and Mines.

Communication for Mahajan

In the bargain, the Communication portfolio goes to Mr. Pramod Mahajan who will continue to be in charge of Parliamentary Affairs; this, plus elevation of Mr. Shourie to Cabinet rank are being described as part of Mr. Vajpayee's effort to put competent "managers" in charge of key ministries.

Four new Ministers of State were administered the oath of office. These include, Mr. Rajiv Pratap Rudi (Commerce and Industry), Mr. Ravi Shanker Prasad (Coals and Mines), Mr. Vijay Goel (Planning and Prime Minister's Office), and Mr. Annasaheb M. L. Patil (Rural Development). A fifth BJP member, Mr. Ashok Pradhan, was also scheduled to take oath, but he could not return from Durban in time and was last heard to be stranded in Dubai at the

time of the swearing-in.

Jagmohan moved to Tourism

Mr. Jagmohan, who as Minister for Urban Development, appears to have annoyed the powerful sections of the BJP by his demolition drive, has been shifted to Tourism, while Mr. Ananth Kumar takes over from him. Ms. Maneka Gandhi, therefore, goes to the Ministry of Culture, while Mr. Satynarayan Jatia loses Labour and gets the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. Today's inductions were confined to the BJP MPs. The Prime Minister vaguely mentioned that he would be "expanding" for the NDA allies at a later date. In the process, he also chose not to take the most important political decision he could take: find a full-time Defence Minister.

PTI reports:

Ruling out the immediate re-entry of the Trinamool Congress and the PMK into his Ministry, Mr. Vajpayee said "there is no new message for them. They have rejoined the NDA. Whenever the question of inclusion of NDA allies will arise, it will be considered."

Jagmohan upset: Page 8

THE HINDU

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Sinha to stay on; Cabinet berths likely for Shahnawaz, Shourie

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Aug. 31. — The Union finance minister, Mr Yashwant Sinha, will retain his Cabinet position despite opposition from many corners. The rural development minister, Mr M Venkaiah Naidu, also stays, according to PMO sources.

The disinvestment minister, Mr Arun Shourie, and the coal minister, Syed Shahnawaz Hussain, are slated to get Cabinet ranks in the Cabinet reshuffling slated for tomorrow.

Among the new inductees with Cabinet ranks are the senior BJP leader, Mr Karia Munda (tribal leader), and the party treasurer, Mr Ved Prakash Goyal (a vaishya) in place of Mr Sunderlal Patwa (a vaishya), who today resigned on health grounds.

The expansion of the ministry will be held tomorrow evening. Despite being unwell, the President has allocated time for fresh induction and elevation to the

Union Council of ministers to allow the Prime Minister to try to rebuild his government's image.

A major face-lift could be witnessed in the induction of Mr Rajiv Pratap 'Rudy', Mr Ravi Shankar Prasad, Mr Vijay Goel, Mr Anna Patil and Mr Ashok Pradhan as the new ministers of state.

Among the prominent MoS who are likely to be dropped are Mr Munni Lal, Mr Sriram Chauhan, Mr Jaisingh Gaekward Patil, Mr Devendra Pradhan, Mr Dhananjay Kumar, Mr Bachchi Singh Rawat and Mr Satyabrata Mukherjee (West Bengal). Major General B C Khanduri (ret'd) is also likely to be accommodated in Uttaranchal.

Initially, there were plans to drop at least two Union ministers from the allies heading prominent economic portfolios, but their stiff opposition forced the government to limit the exercise only to the BJP ministers.

It was speculated that Mr Yashwant Sinha was being

shifted and the RSS headquarters here was even sounded about this, a source said. But the plan was dropped as the Union home minister, Mr LK Advani, argued that this would send a wrong signal. Mr Sinha's office sent along his programme for a visit to Jammu and Kashmir on Sunday, putting an end to the speculation.

The plan to send Mr Venkaiah Naidu to the party was reportedly turned down as the party president, Mr Jana Krishnamurthy, opposed it. They don't share good equations and thus the former's induction into the Cabinet.

Mr Ananth Kumar escaped the axe after a one-on-one meeting with Mr Advani yesterday. He has been rated as very low in terms of performance.

The labour minister, Mr Satya Narayan Jatiya, who was heading an Indian delegation to Singapore was asked to return tonight. Although sources said this was to discuss his ministry's performance, officials said

it was because the first leg of his tour was coming to an end. Late night consultations were scheduled among top BJP leaders to discuss his future.

Mr Karia Munda's induction was long overdue after his claim for Jharkhand's chief ministership was denied. Mr Munda was a Cabinet minister in the BJP's former government.

Mr Goyal is an expert on economic affairs and might do extremely well in an economic ministry. Thus the BJP vice-president, Mr Ramdas Agarwal, may become the party's treasurer. Mr Hussain's elevation intends to send a right message to the minority community.

Mr Arun Shourie's becoming a Cabinet minister is natural as he was rated very highly and certainly as better than many of the youngsters who were made Cabinet ministers. By elevating him, the government plans to project that it's concerned about a good image. His portfolio is unlikely to be changed.

THE STATESMAN

P 2001

Delhi in Kashmir facelift

FROM OUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

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9-6 24/7

New Delhi, July 23: Omar Abdullah's is the Kashmiri face that India wants to sell to the outside world. The decision to make him the minister of state for external affairs is part of the policy to strengthen Delhi's stand that Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of the country.

"I am looking forward to my new assignment. It is an exciting job," Abdullah Junior said after being escorted to his new office in South Block by foreign secretary Chokila Iyer and other senior officials this morning.

The new minister is likely find enough opportunity, voluntarily or otherwise, to interact with the outside world, especially in defending India's policy on Kashmir.

Abdullah, who was a junior minister for commerce, has since early this year been part of the Prime Minister's delegation

to several countries, including the Islamic states of Indonesia, Iran and Malaysia.

On his first day in the new office, Abdullah called on his senior, Jaswant Singh, and was briefed by officials on important issues. It is not yet clear which divisions, apart from passport and Haj, will come his way.

He is likely to play an important part in meeting senior foreign dignitaries and articulating India's position at multilateral and regional fora whenever Singh is unable to attend.

However, his main help — though it may not be admitted so bluntly by South Block mandarins — will be in strengthening India's stand on Kashmir. The Abdullah family name is known to many outside India, making it easier for the young minister to be heard when he speaks about what is happening in the strife-torn state and the role Pakistan, and militants backed by it, are playing to foment trouble in Kashmir.



Omar Abdullah takes charge in New Delhi. (PTI)

Ajit inducted with eye on U.P. polls

The Times of India News Service

NEW DELHI: The swearing-in of only Ajit Singh as Union minister on Sunday evening, less than 24 hours before Parliament's monsoon session commences, signals the NDA government's acceptance of two imperatives.



Ajit Singh

One, that the government may be forced to hold the crucial Uttar Pradesh assembly elections in October this year, if the high court

rules that the life of the assembly cannot be extended beyond five years. And two, the Prime Minister feels his cabinet expansion plans are hemmed in by conflicting claims of NDA partners and others hoping to join the coalition and a host of problems confronting him—the Naga ceasefire accord fiasco, the US-64 mess, the failed Indo-Pak summit and the violence in Kashmir.

Sources in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said the decision to induct Mr Singh was taken after the Prime Minister consulted senior colleagues. On Friday, he discussed the issue with home minister L.K. Advani and on Saturday,

he met Haryana chief minister Om Prakash Chautala, who has been opposing Mr Singh's entry into the NDA as well as the cabinet since they are rival Jat leaders. Apparently, Mr Chautala has reluctantly accepted the inevitable but may still have some say on Mr Singh's portfolio, it is learnt. And finally, on Sunday, the PM also spoke to Punjab chief minister Parkash Singh Badal.

According to sources what clinched the issue in his favour was the BJP state unit's recommendation that the electoral alliance with Mr Singh's Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) be sealed in western U.P.

Cabinet reshuffle soon, says PM

Pankaj Vohra

On board special aircraft, May 16

THE PRIME Minister today said he intended to give his council of ministers a new look and a Cabinet reshuffle was on the cards. New faces would be introduced to fill vacancies and certain portfolios reallocated, he said.

Talking to reporters while returning to the capital, Atal Bihari Vajpayee took everyone by surprise when he said preparations for Lok Sabha polls should begin following the results of the just-concluded Assembly elections in five States. However, when asked to elaborate, he hastened to say the parliamentary polls would only take place after four years but there should be no let-up on the preparations.

Asked if the Assembly election results had sent alarm bells ringing in his party, Vajpayee said he did not think the results were a reflection in any way on the performance of his Government, adding that he had a gut feeling on his way to Kuala Lumpur that the DMK was going to be routed.

"Jayalalitha managed to get everyone together in Tamil Nadu while the DMK could not forge an alliance." But overall, he said, "we

KNEE OPERATION IN JUNE

THE PM will have his second knee operation in Mumbai in the first week of June. US surgeon Dr Ranawat had performed the first operation. He said Dr Ranawat would perform the second operation, at the same hospital. **HTC**

have neither lost nor won. The results have been mixed and in a few areas, the BJP has gained".

Asked on the possibility of Mamata Banerjee rejoining the ministry, he sarcastically asked the correspondent whether he had any such information. "You should not spread such rumours." He said the coming polls in Uttar Pradesh would again give the BJP an opportunity to test its strength and the results would silence the critics.

Describing his trip to Malaysia as a landmark for bilateral ties, Vajpayee said the momentum to improve relations was missing in the absence of any top-level meeting. Following the one-on-one meetings with Malaysian PM Mahathir Mohammad, the results were likely to be positive, he added.

He said the media's obsession with the talks revolving around

the duties on Palm oil imports did not give the correct impression of the range of discussions he had with his Malaysian counterpart. Malaysia, he said, shared India's concerns on Kashmir and had favoured a peaceful solution. Its condemnation of terrorism was a major achievement since an impression had gained currency of late that Malaysia was supporting India's opponents.

He said India was also able to explain its stand on the proposed US missile defence shield and had categorically told Malaysia that it was in favour of reduction in arsenal. India also did not endorse unilateral termination of any bilateral agreement.

Vajpayee said he had asked the people of Indian origin to persuade the Malaysian authorities for a Netaji memorial and India would extend any help towards this. "I was surprised that Malaysia has no Netaji memorial. **Ministers' assets:** The Prime Minister has asked his colleagues to declare their assets. A PMO spokesman said tonight that Vajpayee has ensured that the ministers file the annual statement of their assets. This exercise has been on for the last three years, he said, adds PTI.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

17 MAY 2001

Nitish given charge of Rlys

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

g. Council of Ministers

NEW DELHI, March 20 - Agriculture minister Mr Nitish Kumar has been given additional charge of the railway ministry that fell vacant after Miss Mamata Banerjee resigned, according to a Rashtrapati Bhavan communique.

This is the second time Mr Kumar is presiding over the rail ministry. He had earlier resigned as railway minister following a train accident.

Following the resignation of Mr George Fernandes, Mr Kumar with his two Samata Party colleagues in the government had resigned to express solidarity with their leader.

When these ministers withdrew their resignations yesterday, it was clear that



Mr Nitish Kumar

5/16

Mr Kumar, in the process, will be given the charge of the railway ministry.

Meanwhile an uneasy calm prevailed in the Samata Party today, a day after six of its MPs threatened to revolt against the return of three of their colleagues to the Government, withdrawing their resignations.

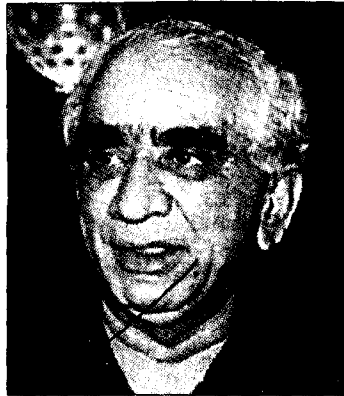
The party leader, Mr George Fernandes, told reporters that he was hopeful of sorting out the problems.

"I will talk to my party MPs and try to pursue them to sort out the problems. I will also tell them not to resign their seats", Mr Fernandes said.

The "rebellion" reportedly has much to do with the long-pending ministerial aspirations of some party MPs.

THE STATESMAN

21 MAR 2001



Jaswant gets Defence as ^{Q. Council} additional charge

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, March 18

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS Minister
Jaswant Singh was today given
additional charge of Defence.

The Prime Minister is believed
to have chosen Singh because of
his background as a former
army officer. Besides, Atal
Bihari Vajpayee did not want to
keep the portfolio himself with
the PMO under attack from the
Opposition after the tehelka
expose.

Singh's assignment is proba-
bly only a temporary arrange-
ment. George Fernandes is
believed to have got an assurance
from the NDA that he will be
reinstated as Defence Minister
once the judicial probe gives him
a clean chit. Singh's primary
task in his new, if temporary,
office will be to restore the confi-
dence of the armed forces. He
must also face Parliament, which
meets tomorrow.

With Sonia Gandhi calling for
a campaign to oust the Govern-
ment, Congress MPs are expect-
ed to be aggressive. Judging by
its mood, the Opposition is
unlikely to allow a discussion in
the House. But if it does, it is
upto Singh to establish the Gov-
ernment is keen to find the truth.
On Saturday, Vajpayee had said
the Government would not let
the confidence of soldiers to be
shaken and would ensure that
"the security of the country
emerges stronger".

Related report on Page 9

18 MAR 2001

19 MAR 2001

It's George or me: Mamata to PM

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, March 14. — Miss Mamata Banerjee today threatened to quit the NDA government if Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee didn't get Mr George Fernandes to resign.

Trinamul leaders said "this time the threat is real".

She has been isolated in the NDA and the government is in no mood to concede her demands — the Prime Minister later said he wouldn't ask the defence minister to resign. Hence, Miss Banerjee seems to have no option but to snap ties with the NDA (read BJP) and ally with the Congress in the West Bengal Assembly polls.

The government today iterated that it wants to first discuss the matter in Parliament, virtually rejecting Miss Banerjee's demand for a high-level probe. After the NDA decided to stick together

and refused to take action against Mr Fernandes, the Trinamul leader, Mr Sudip Bandopadhyaya, said his party would wait for Mr Vajpayee to formally reply to Miss Banerjee and then his party's state committee would decide the next course of action.

The Trinamul's isolation within the NDA was evident when allies like TDP and National Conference, whom Miss Banerjee has been cultivating with great care for some time, refused to fight along with her. The Trinamul says that if Miss Banerjee "compromises" on the issue of corruption, she will "lose her credentials to fight the corrupt rule of the CPI-M in West Bengal".

But no ally is with the Trinamul? Mr Bandhopadhyaya said: "To fight against corruption one needs guts. And whatever Miss Banerjee is today is because of her fight against corruption and there is no question of any

compromise on that issue."

Last night, Miss Banerjee boycotted the Cabinet meeting, sounding the first warning to the government. Today, she sent a three-page letter to Mr Vajpayee hours before the NDA meeting. She didn't attend today's meeting either.

She said *tehelka.com's* exposures "have shaken the faith of the people reposed on this government".

"It's in the hour of crisis like this, that the government is expected to take immediate action to restore this faith of the people. The response of the government so far, has unfortunately, not been able to restore this faith," she told Mr Vajpayee.

She spelled out six demands. "Since the entire issue relates to defence deals, all officials named in the video footage must not continue in the office".

Though she swore by the

Prime Minister's integrity, she did target the PMO. Her letter said: "Specific allegations have also been made in the video footage and the transcription against certain highly placed officials. The whole nation is convinced about the integrity of the... Prime Minister. No bureaucrat should be allowed to tarnish that. Officials whose names figure here must be asked to go till the investigations are over." This is widely seen as an indirect attack on the Prime Minister's principal secretary and foster son-in-law, Mr Brajesh Mishra and Mr Ranjan Bhattacharya.

Miss Banerjee has asked Mr Vajpayee to order a probe headed either by a joint parliamentary committee or a Supreme Court judge or the CBI. The probe team should be named after consulting NDA partners and the main Opposition parties.

Fernandes not to quit, Tehelka to bare more

Council of ministers 5-7 15/3

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, March 14. — The defence minister came out unscathed today but not the defence ministry even as *tehelka.com* said it had “conclusive” evidence of the PMO’s involvement in the “defence deal”.

Tehelka has said it would soon come out with the next set of video-tapes in “Defence Gate”.

Mr George Fernandes today carried the entire NDA, minus the Trinamul, along with him in rejecting the Opposition’s demand for his resignation. But the ministry Mr Fernandes runs suspended four people, including Major-General PSK Chaudhary, additional director-general, (weapons and equipment).

The other three are: Mr HC Pant, Ordnance Factory Board staff officer, Mr Narendra Singh, defence ministry’s assistant financial adviser, and Mr P Sasi, an assistant at the Army headquarters.

(In Thiruvananthapuram, Mathew Samuel, one of the two Tehelka reporters who carried out “Operation West End” said the portal had concrete proof against the the home ministry’s office in a Rs 1,300-crore defence deal with an Israel-based firm for fencing communications system along the border, says UNI.

(He said things were in an advanced stage and part of the commission, allegedly about 25 per cent (Rs 325 crore), had already changed hands. Senior officials in Mr LK Advani’s office and a retired major and ex-classmate of the former Army chief, Mr VP Malik, had brokered the deal, he alleged.

(Without the PMO’s knowledge, this deal couldn’t be ratified as any defence deal above Rs 50 crore should get the Union Cabinet’s approval. And to pressurise the Cabinet, it was essential to get the support of the ruling party, Samuel said.

(The Prime Minister’s principal secretary, Mr Brajesh Mishra, Samuel alleged was directly involved in “West End” deal and he was “basically a bureaucrat who took money for himself, politicians and the ruling party”.



WHAT CAN WE SAY? Mr George Fernandes and Mr AB Vajpayee at the NDA meeting in New Delhi on Wednesday. — AP/PTI

Jaya sees ‘no wrong’

NEW DELHI, March 14. — Mrs Jaya Jaitley today said she won’t quit as Samata Party chief because she had done “no wrong”. In her first statement since the Tehelka expose, she said: “I have said nothing which I won’t not say in public. I don’t see any need to resign, I have done no wrong”.

She told journalists here: “I’ve not taken any money personally. I had asked those who had visited me to hand over the donation to party officials”. Samata had never interfered with the working of the government at any level, including the defence ministry, she said.

“No defence deal was discussed. When they (portal team) touched on the subject for promoting their armament firm, I fobbed them off,” she said. From the transcript itself, it was evident that she told them that if they felt any injustice had been done to them, she would look into it, provided it was not against national interest, she said.

Maj-Gen pleads ‘guilty’

NEW DELHI, March 14. — Major-General PSK Chaudhary, additional director-general of weapons and equipment, suspended today after Tehelka exposed a “defence deal”, admitted tonight that he had taken money from an undercover reporter of a news portal. “Yes, that’s a mistake... I agree, I admit,” he told Star News. Maj-Gen Chaudhary, whom *tehelka.com* claimed to have paid Rs 1 lakh, said: “With no favour being done, no commitment being made, yet they offer you some money for nothing. That’s what it is”. He said he hadn’t asked for any money. — PTI

(The portal will come out with the second part, another four-hour tape about the rest of the story with more names, including that of Union commu-

nications minister Mr Ram Vilas Paswan soon, he said.

(“I myself handed over the money to Mr Bangaru Laxman. He first asked for Rs 10 lakh,”

Samuel said.)

NDA partners today closed ranks, with only Miss Mamata Banerjee demanding Mr Fernandes’ resignation as a condition to stay with the ruling coalition. The demand was rejected outright by NDA leaders, who now appear to have reconciled to an alliance sans the Trinamul.

“The numbers are with us,” a Union minister said, indicating that the Telugu Desam chief, Mr N Chandrababu Naidu, had assured the Prime Minister of his full support. He said Miss Banerjee would be persuaded to be “reasonable as her name had also figured in the tapes”.

To demonstrate unity, the NDA fielded DMK leader and commerce minister Mr Murali Maran, still unwell, to brief journalists about the outcome of the emergency NDA meeting at the Prime Minister’s home.

“There’s complete solidarity within the NDA and all have expressed full faith in the leadership of Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee,” Mr Maran said. The NDA will not shy away from debate, he said. The government is ready for an inquiry to be decided by Parliament. But a Union minister said the Centre would prefer a JPC probe to a judicial inquiry. But the Congress today rejected a JPC probe.

Threat to reporter

Samuel today said he was facing a threat to his life because he and his colleague had taken on bigwigs. He reached here a few days ago well before the tapes on the “defence deal” were made public. He said his wife too had got threat calls. An employee of a private firm, she was recently chased by some men. When such threats continued, her employer asked her to resign.

On page 6:

- What’s in a name? Ask the Laxmans
- BJD MLAs up in arms
- Tehelka a boon for Laloo
- Editorial: Inquiry with a difference, page 8
- Senex defies Tehelka blow, page 14

George quits after Mamata pullout

D- Council of Ministers SF 163

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, March 15. — If politics were cricket, Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee today may well have felt what Sourav Ganguly did on the third day of the Kolkata Test against Australia; two key members of his NDA team were out: Mr George Fernandes quit, Mamata Banerjee resigned and Mrs Jaya Jaitley was forced to go on the third day of Tehelka controversy.

And the Opposition looked and sounded as if it had smelt blood, just like Australia had done on the third day at Eden Gardens.

The Prime Minister, his advisers, his coalition and his party had to assure themselves today that, as of now, the odds were against the possibility of an outright defeat — the fall of the NDA government.

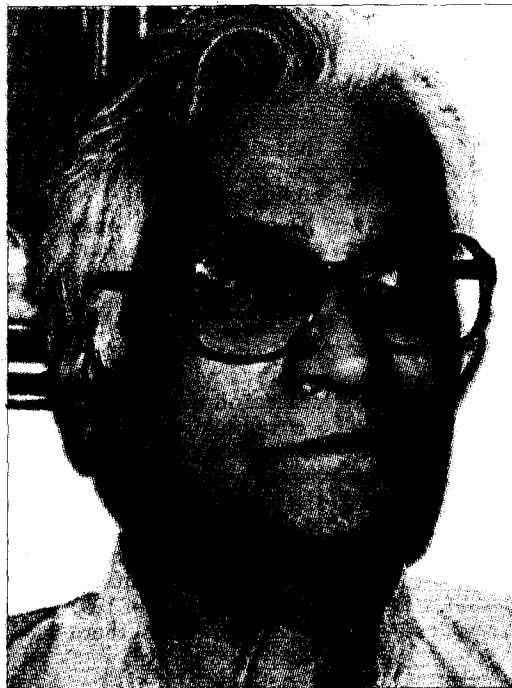
The NDA's political managers pointed to the numbers — NDA minus Trinamul in the Lok Sabha will be 294; majority requires 272. The Samata Party, which finally acknowledged the inevitable today and sacrificed both "George and Jaya", has given an "assurance" of outside "support" to the government even if it leaves the ministry.

The JD-U, the other party to raise a stink over the shady "defence deal", has six MPs. Even if it goes the Trinamul way, say BJP leaders, "stability" won't be affected.

But late tonight the Samata came under pressure to pull out of the government with party workers saying that Mr Fernandes had been victimised.

Trinamul MPs met twice today, before and after Mr Fernandes's resignation. There was a feeling among politicians that Miss Banerjee had jumped the gun by quitting too soon, for Mr Fernandes, as she had demanded, finally resigned.

But the minister of state for external affairs, Mr Ajit Panja, who too resigned, said: "Mr Fernandes's resignation was only one of our demands." He sought a probe against "everyone, inclu-



Mr George Fernandes



Miss Mamata Banerjee

ding the PMO". That demand would have suited the Opposition, but they were looking further ahead.

Opposition members virtually fought a pitched battle outside Parliament with NDA MPs today after both Houses were adjourned early. They spent the day hoping for the NDA to collapse and planned ways to form an alternative. Yesterday's third front rechristened itself as People's Front.

But the People's Front didn't invite the RJD to its "coalition" meeting. And the front has apparently not resolved how it would work with the Congress.

Congress leaders left for Bangalore today for the AICC session. Before leaving, none of them was prepared to squarely address the most important question — whether or not the party will abdicate leadership and support the front cheered by three ex-Prime Ministers.

One of them, Mr HD Deve Gowda, is "entrusted with the job of convincing the TDP" to

leave the NDA. But TDP leaders in Delhi said their party had "experimented" earlier (the UF governments) and "doesn't believe that a front backed by the national party would be stable". Only a NDA-like coalition, a national party supported by regional outfits, is viable.

Not surprisingly perhaps the still to be sorted out glitches in an alternative coalition have not prevented the PF from selecting a prime ministerial candidate.

Another door was opened today, by NDA leaders and government departments — into

the possibility of investigations into *tehelka.com*. Mr Fernandes in his resignation speech called *tehelka* a "bogus company". He urged the Prime Minister to order an inquiry into the entire gamut of defence deals.

Senior government officials said "informal inquiries" have started against the website's ownership pattern, specifically looking into the information that a part of *tehelka.com* is owned by First Global, a stock broking firm under investigation in Mumbai's stock market scandal. Even Trinamul said *tehelka.com* should be probed.

Some NDA leaders, however, said that an inquiry against *tehelka.com* may look like a witch-hunt, an impression the government cannot afford to create right now.

The job right now for the NDA is to keep the flock together, which coalition leaders insist will not be a problem, even if there is no political VVS Laxman or Harbhajan Singh in sight.

On page 6:
 ■ His heart was in the right place, not his head
 ■ Navin assures support
 ■ 'Rebel Socialist' seeks to clarify stand

■ NDA has no right to rule: Anil, page 3

Editorial: In whose defence? page 8

SAMATA CRISIS

NEW DELHI, March 15. — The Samata Party has plunged into a deep crisis after Mr George Fernandes's resignation. Three party ministers, Mr Nitish Kumar, Mr Digvijay Singh and Mr Srinavasa Prasad, too have forwarded their resignation to the Prime Minister as a "show of solidarity with Mr Fernandes".

Some Samata leaders said the decision on the "collective resignation" was taken at a party meeting at Mr Fernandes's home. But Mr Vajpayee refused to accept their resignations because their names didn't figure in the *tehelka* tapes.

Some leaders hinted that Mr Fernandes resigned after the President, in his capacity as the supreme commander of the defence forces, expressed concern over the whole *tehelka.com* episode to the Prime Minister.

Soon after Mr Fernandes's resignation, scores of Samata workers raised slogans in front of his house, expressing support for their leader.

The Samata spokesman, Mr Sambhu Srivastava, said his party will fight back, but sounded angry at the "black-mailing and pressure tactics of Miss Mamata Banerjee".

Tehelka office

Some policeman have been posted outside the Soami Nagar office of *tehelka.com* since last night to guard it against possible attacks. A senior police officer said: "Since last night a head constable and two constables are on duty in eight-hour shifts, round-the-clock outside the portal's office."

The officer said senior members of the portal had applied for personal security too but refused to say whether that had been provided. — SNS

PRESIDENT ACCEPTS RESIGNATIONS

Maran meets PM, Cong. gets busy

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, FEB. 7. The President, Mr. K. R. Narayanan, today accepted the resignations of the two PMK Ministers, Mr. N. T. Shanmugam, Minister of State (independent charge) for Coal, and Mr. E. Ponnuswamy, Minister of State for Petroleum and Natural Gas, from the Council of Ministers. The resignations were accepted on the Prime Minister's advice, according to a communique from the Rashtrapati Bhavan. And the prime ministerial advice was rendered two days after the Ministers had put in their papers.

Before the resignations were sent to the President, the Commerce Minister and DMK leader, Mr. Murasoli Maran, had a 20-minute meeting with Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee. According to sources close to Mr. Maran, the Prime Minister was given a detailed assessment of the possible realignment of forces after the PMK's departure from the DMK-led front. The Prime Minister was given an idea of what could be the possible options before the Congress and the Tamil Maanila Congress in the wake of the AIADMK-PMK tie-up.

The PMK's departure is being described by NDA sources as a development that had been in the making for months, and that no one was really surprised that Dr.

Ramadoss finally snapped ties. The political fallout, if any, is predicted to be confined to Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. Yet, there is no explanation why Mr. Vajpayee took two days to accept the resignations.

Cong. consultations

On the other hand, the Congress central leadership has summoned its leaders from Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, for consultations on the latest turn of events. Senior leaders led by the party general secretary in-charge, Mr. Ghulam Nabi Azad, held a series of meetings today with the Pondicherry Chief Minister, Mr. P. Shanmugham, the PCC chief, Mr. Narayanswami, and the Lok Sabha member, Mr. M. O. H. Farooq.

A similar exercise has been scheduled for tomorrow with the leaders of the TNCC. Faced with the prospect of being left out in the cold, the party is now scrambling to see what it can do to retrieve its meagre fortunes from a hopeless situation.

Senior leaders have also been in touch with the TMC chief, Mr. G. K. Moopanar, to find out which way he is headed. Despite the fact that Mr. Moopanar had been unflinching in demonstrating his proximity to the Congress president, the party is a bit worried about reports that he is still weighing

the option of tying up with the DMK once again. Such a development would effectively render a third front option unfeasible.

For the last two days, senior AICC leaders have been trying to persuade Mr. Moopanar to travel to Delhi to confer with them but the TMC boss has remained non-committal. He is peeved at the fact that the Congress chose to start direct negotiations with the AIADMK without first consulting him.

The central leadership, however, is still going through the motions of assessing all possible choices. The party cannot possibly align with the DMK and the only option is to either try and work out some face-saving formula with the AIADMK or explore the possibility of a third front. Though a section of the party still feels the AIADMK option should not be jettisoned immediately, the overriding feeling is against conceding the Pondicherry Government to the PMK.

The AICC leaders argue that in Pondicherry the Congress has always been the major partner and cite that in the last elections it won 9 of the 18 seats it contested, while the AIADMK secured 3 out of 10. "We are the major player there and there is no question of conceding any ground," says a senior leader.

Editorial: Page 12

THE HINDU

- 8 FEB 2001

PMK ministers quit Atal Govt to join AIADMK

Shekhar Iyer & G.C. Shekhar
New Delhi/Chennai, February 5

UNION MINISTERS of State N. T. Shanmugham and E. Ponnuswamy of the PMK today resigned from the Vajpayee ministry. They handed in their papers to Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee after he had an hour-long meeting with PMK founder-president S. Ramadoss.

The PMK chief told the Prime Minister that his party was leaving the NDA for a tie-up with the AIADMK. The Tamil Nadu Assembly polls are due in May. Mr Ramadoss is to meet AIADMK chief Jayalalitha tomorrow.

The stability of the Vajpayee Government is not under threat: the PMK has just five members in the Lok Sabha. Mr Ramadoss had told the PM that any front led by the AIADMK had a good chance of winning the Assembly polls because of a "strong" anti-incumbency factor against the DMK.

He made it clear to Mr Vajpayee that his party was neither against him personally nor the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). But the PMK's continuance in the NDA did not seem tenable after the party had decided to join hands with Ms Jayalalitha. Apparently, it was suggested to Dr Ramadoss that the two PMK Ministers could continue even if the party goes in for an anti-DMK arrangement in Tamil Nadu. But he was against this.

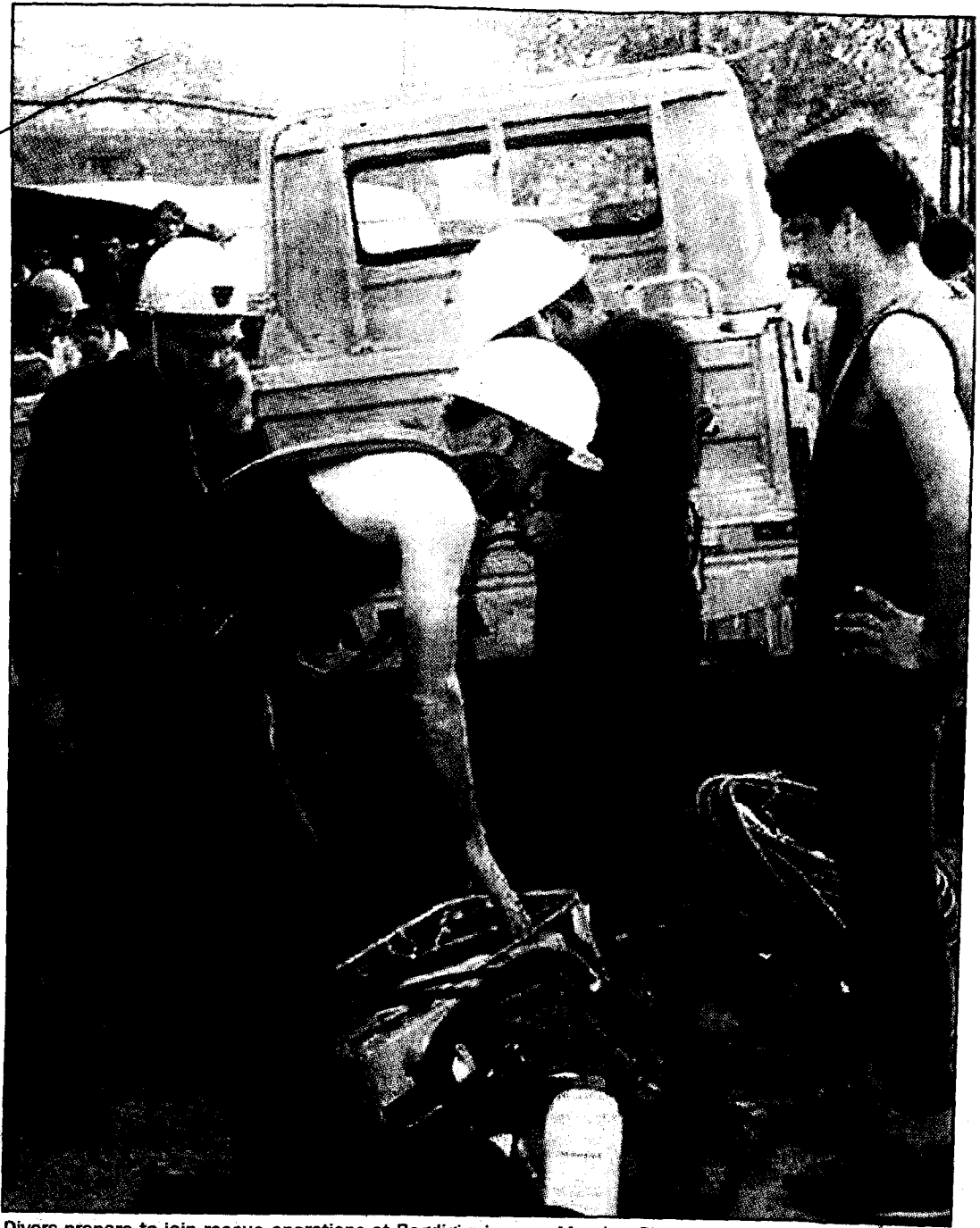
The Prime Minister went into a huddle with Union ministers L.K. Advani, Jaswant Singh and George

Fernandes and BJP chief Bangaru Laxman to discuss the political fallout. The PM is said to have also spoken to DMK chief M. Karunanidhi.

The perception in the BJP is that the PMK's anger was directed against the DMK and not against the BJP or the coalition at the Centre. However, neither the BJP nor the NDA can afford to antagonise the DMK, one of the pillars of the alliance. The PMK's USP in Tamil Nadu politics is that it can mobilise the Vanniyar community's votes en bloc, particularly in northern and western Tamil Nadu. "Maybe, Ramadoss is trying to strike a quick bargain with Jayalalitha before she finalises her front in Tamil Nadu. There is no other plausible reason for withdrawing from the government when the nation is facing a calamity in Gujarat and Assembly elections are still two months away," commented a senior Tamil Nadu BJP leader.

Dr. Ramadoss has been sulking ever since the DMK and BJP refused to eject Vazhapadi K. Ramamurthy's Thamizhaga Rajiv Congress (TRC) from the NDA.

The PMK leader personally fell out with his one-time friend and TRC leader Vazhapadi K. Ramamurthy, after the latter accused the PMK of sabotaging his chances in the Salem seat during the 1999 Lok Sabha elections. The two were involved in a slanging match and Dr. Ramadoss declared that the PMK could never co-exist happily with Ramamurthy's TRC in the NDA.



Divers prepare to join rescue operations at Bagdigi mines on Monday. Photo: Sukhdeo

PM rejects Nitish's resignation

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Jan. 6. — The Prime Minister today rejected Mr Nitish Kumar's resignation which was forwarded to him by the NDA convener, Mr George Fernandes, in the evening.

The way things unfolded today clearly indicated Mr Kumar had manoeuvred things in his favour. Aware that four dissident MPs had arrived in Delhi to hold talks with Mr Fernandes, whom they claimed to be their leader and whose decision they said they would accept, Mr Kumar spoke to the defence minister and pressed him to forward his resignation letter to the Prime Minister along with a letter he had written to him. This pre-empted any possibility of reconciliation between the two factions.

Mr Fernandes may go along with Mr Kumar who continues to be an important force in Bihar. Apart from the fact that Samata politics is mostly Bihar-centric, Mr Fernandes's constituency, Nawada, has a sizeable number Kurmi voters, the caste base on which the party thrives and to which Mr Kumar belongs.

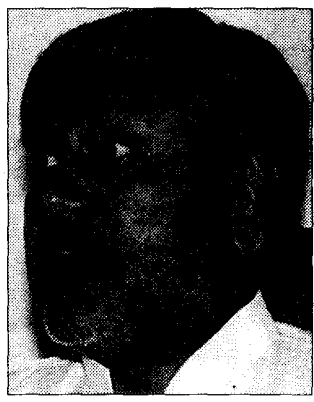
Mr Kumar has till 15 January to decide whether he would continue as a Union

minister. The Prime Minister leaves for Vietnam and Indonesia tomorrow and will return on 14 January. He said: "I'll not divulge if and what talks I had with the Prime Minister's Office."

It is likely that the Samata national council convention will toe Mr Kumar's line -- merger with the JD-U. He dropped enough hints to this effect. "I'm only reiterating the party resolution of 6 January, 2000, which said the merger with the JD-U should not be formalised now in light of the problems that the party faced in Karnataka. It should be deferred till February, till Bihar Assembly polls were held."

Mr Kumar praised the JD-U chief and the civil aviation minister, Mr Sharad Yadav, as a "leader of substance" whom Jayaprakash Narain had selected as his candidate in 1974. Mr Kumar, however, didn't say why his party had petitioned the Lok Sabha Speaker to recognise them as separate group.

Ridiculing the reports on reconciliation moves, he said. "Where is the chance of a reconciliation? Just because six MPs who have no political base are saying something the party cannot be made to accept it. Who are they to dictate terms."



Mr Nitish Kumar

THE STATESMAN

7 JAN 2001

Nitish steps down from ministry

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

PATNA/NEW DELHI, Jan. 4. — The agriculture minister, Mr Nitish Kumar, today resigned from the Union ministry as infighting thickened within the Samata Party.

Announcing his resignation at Patna airport, he said: "I have handed over my resignation to the Samata Party leader in the Lok Sabha, Mr George Fernandes. The letter has been addressed to the Prime Minister. I did not find it fit to stay in the ministry when six of my party MPs were criticising me."

On why he didn't send his resignation to the Prime Minister, he said: "My resignation follows differences in the party. So I decided to hand it over to the party leader in the Lok Sabha," thus leaving it to Mr Fernandes's discretion to forward the letter to the Prime Minister.

Rebel party MPs described Mr Kumar's resignation as a "drama". "Had he been really serious on quitting the Cabinet, he should have handed over his resignation to the Prime Minister," said party MP and Bihar unit chief, Mr Raghunath Jha.

Mr Jha said: "We will call a parallel Samata Party meeting in Patna tomorrow to elect our president. We are the real Samata Party."

He is already in the fray for the state party president's post against Mr Kumar's wishes. He

and other rebel MPs are opposing Mr Kumar on the issue of the Samata's proposed merger with the Janata Dal-U and are demanding that Mr Jha continue as the state unit president.

Mr Kumar said there was no formal proposal for merger. "But if the proposal comes, it will be discussed in the party forum."

The resignation is seen as part of the pressure tactics to browbeat the dissidents who are now all set to split the party in Patna tomorrow at its parallel convention.

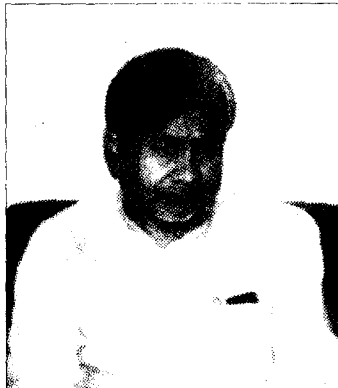
With the resignation, Mr Fernandes's attempts at a patch-up has suffered a major setback as it shows Mr Kumar is no mood to yield to the dissidents or toe Mr Fernandes's patch-up formula to re-elect Mr Jha as Bihar unit president and

stall the merger with the JD-U.

The Samata president, Mrs Jaya Jaitley, admitted that Mr Kumar resigned because of the bickering in the party. "He perhaps felt that if he remained in office, others could have accused him of influencing the internal electoral process."

He is an important leader and his resignation should not be accepted by the Prime Minister, she said.

However, the decision should be left to the Prime Minister, she added.



Mr Nitish Kumar

■ Samata chief lost for words, page 9