

MEA runs for cover-up

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Nilova Roy Chaudhury in New Delhi

April 30. — Desperately trying to cover up for the faux pas of denying that the European Union did indeed issue a demarche, the ministry of external affairs after a high-level meet today decided to reverse the thrust of the criticism by suggesting that some countries had not maintained "elementary norms of restraint" needed in diplomacy.

At a meeting with visiting Danish foreign minister Mr Perstig Moller, Mr Jaswant Singh, spoke of Gujarat "openly, without prickliness", officials said, a point which Denmark, due to assume the European Union presidency after June, appreciated. Denmark, as other Scandinavian nations, is particularly touchy over human rights.

"We object to the way the issue has been raised by some countries," a senior official said, adding, "That doesn't mean we're not prepared to discuss the issue, nor does it mean that we have no accountability. The style and the manner of diplomacy is what we object to." The thrust now focuses on the finer points of what a 'demarche' constitutes.

The Spanish ambassador in New Delhi, Mr Alberto Escudero, said India's ambassador in Madrid, Mr Dilip Lahiri, was called in by the political director for Asia, Mr Conde, last week, and the EU's "position" on the situation in Gujarat was conveyed to him. He declined from calling it a demarche, which is a political step or proceeding, usually a bilateral affair to convey serious concern.

The MEA spokesperson said: "At a recent meeting, which took place at the ambassador's initiative, the Gujarat situation and other issues were discussed... We don't consider there is room for any "demarche" to us on Gujarat by the EU that seeks to play to the public gallery." The EU routinely issues India demarches on the existence of the death penalty in this country, sources said.

Mr Lahiri is here for the India-EU troika official-level meeting, scheduled for Thursday, to discuss a range of issues ahead of the October summit. Prime Minister Mr Vajpayee is likely to visit Copenhagen for the India-EU summit. Indian heads of missions from Madrid, Brussels and Copenhagen will participate at the meet, led by foreign secretary Chokila Iyer, with representatives of the three countries.

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