

Party Clarifies Stand On Secular Alliance Following Press Meet

Sonia is Cong's Prime candidate

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 29 DECEMBER

IT was a clarification that was not needed at all. Congress on Monday disowned the concession Ms Sonia Gandhi was accused of having made on Sunday over the leadership of the next non-NDA coalition. Worried over the "misinterpretation" of Ms Gandhi's speech where she was seen by few as having agreed not to insist on the leadership of the "secular" alliance, the party leadership on Monday got spokesperson S. Jaipal Reddy to dump the alleged formulation as waste.

Even though Mr Reddy took the line that the issue of leadership could be sorted out among those who are going to be the parts of the "secular" alliance, his thrust was on quelling the perception of a climbdown on the leadership question. Mr Reddy refused to pledge support to the third Front and stressed the par-



SONIA: HIGH FLIER

ty's preference, disregarding Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav's reservations, for a pre-poll understanding. He also seemed to dare others in the "secular" camp to name anybody who could match Ms Gandhi's claim to lead the alliance.

Mr Reddy made it clear that party would take the field pro-

jecting Ms Gandhi as its choice for the prime ministership, scotching the impression generated on Sunday that the party could leave the leadership question to be decided after the polls.

"Sonia Gandhi is the Congress party's prime ministerial candidate," Mr Reddy said in response to a volley of questions over Ms Gandhi's purported willingness to make way for others in the race for the top job.

Asked whether the party emerging as the single largest group in the polls will be a claimant for the leadership, he said "this question will be settled by the parties concerned through talks." Many in the political circles feel that the disclaimer was not needed since Ms Gandhi did not make the concession in the first place. At the root of the confusion was Ms Gandhi's statement on Sunday in Mumbai that the issue of the prime ministership should be left for the people to decide.

BJP makes fun of leadership debate

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BJP on Monday leapt at the Congress' flip-flop over the leadership of the non-NDA alliance, hurling a "where is the vacancy" taunt at the adversary. Reacting to Congress' resiling from Ms Sonia Gandhi's so-called concession on the leadership issue, the BJP spokesperson said the Congress was wasting its energy in an unnecessary pursuit.

"Congress or Congress-led coalition will have no problem as to who will be the Prime Minister since Atal Bihari Vajpayee will once again be the Prime Minister. People will take the right decision," said Mr Prakash Javadekar.

Congress will not impose its leadership on others: Sonia

● 'Like-minded parties must set aside differences'

By Mahesh Vijapurkar

MUMBAI, DEC. 28. Giving a further push to the idea of a coalition to "defeat anti-secular forces" in the next elections, the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, today said the party did not and would not impose its leadership on others. She told like-minded parties that "we must set aside all our differences to put up a compact alliance."

"Who gets to be the Prime Minister will be decided by the people. The Congress does not and will not impose its leadership on others and say who should head which party," she told newsmen just before he left for New Delhi after a two-day visit to this city where she got the party into election mode. She said it was entirely an internal affair of the Congress as to who should lead the party.

Ms. Gandhi said the party had not interfered with, nor does it intend to in the future, the internal affairs of other parties because it was "unfair" to do so.

Earlier this year in Shimla, Ambika Soni, AICC general secretary, had more or less suggested that those who wanted to join the Congress in an anti-NDA alliance would have to accept Ms. Gandhi's leadership.

When Ms. Gandhi's attention was drawn to the Nationalist Congress Party president, Sharad Pawar's statement that his party was willing to set aside the issue of "foreign origin," she said: "I am not aware of Pawarji's statement."

Asked whether the foreign origin issue had become irrelevant, she said: "It is for the people of the country to decide."

Several parties, including the NCP, have had reservations about Ms. Gandhi leading a coalition to fight the BJP-led grouping.



The NCP has, however, said that "contentious issues" could be set aside.

At one point, Ms. Gandhi conceded that the issue of a merger between the NCP and her party could be discussed, though no such a proposal existed. That response, however, only went to underscore her thrust that differences on other issues should not come in the way of fighting the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance.

The involvement of the Congress in Jammu and Kashmir, Bihar, Maharashtra and Meghalaya in sustaining secular governments, according to Ms. Gandhi, was a signal for the future and already her party was holding talks with several others to achieve a unified, secular opposition. She said that setting aside their differences, the

Congress and the NCP was in Government in Maharashtra.

Ms. Gandhi said she had been meeting Mr. Pawar in Parliament and at home. Specifically on the issue of a coalition, "we will certainly have to meet. We are already together in the Government" here and some of the Congress leaders in Maharashtra had been in touch with him. But on more pointed references to the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party, she conceded that the situation was rather "fluid."

After a fairly impressive rally held here yesterday, Ms. Gandhi exuded optimism about bringing the other parties into a broad coalition. She even went on to speak frankly on the reasons for the wins and the losses in the recent Assembly elections in which the Congress secured only Delhi.

If in Delhi the party retained the Government because of the anti-incumbency factor at the Centre, in Rajasthan, good work got washed out by five years of difficult drought. The Congress also

failed to match the BJP's aggressive publicity campaign and, from these, the party was learning its lessons and preparing for the challenges ahead. Social infrastructure and empowerment in Madhya Pradesh did not seem to match the expectations of the people.

Ms. Gandhi said that during her leadership the party's rank and file had maximum freedom and the party was not excessively centralised. In Punjab, Gujarat and Kerala there were difficulties, but the various elements of the organisation would have to work together. On Vidarbha, she said her party was ready to provide a coordination committee just as was given to Telengana. The issue of statehood was still being discussed.

Congress trashes 'new Kamraj plan' theory

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S.T.A

CL Manoj in New Delhi

Dec. 25. — The Congress top brass, engaged in a post-resignation drama power struggle, are now focussing on Mrs Sonia Gandhi's scheduled address to a party rally in Mumbai on Saturday, the eve of Congress foundation day. It was in Mumbai that Rajiv Gandhi delivered the 1985 AICC centenary plenum speech calling for removal of 'power brokers' in the party and underlining the need to bring the leadership closer to the 'genuine party workers'. Many Congressmen wonder whether Mrs Gandhi will make a similar call against 'vested interests' in the party. The Friday night resignation drama has also revived memo-

ries of previous 'landmark resignation episodes' that had tilted power equations. This, more so, as some propagators of the failed plot had boasted privately that they were on a "Kamaraj-like plan" to "revamp the entire party leadership structure" till its anti-climax on Sunday night when Mrs Gandhi distanced herself from them after the old guard refused to play ball.

Many leaders say comparing this "backroom manoeuvring" to the original Kamaraj Plan would be an insult to history. The 1963 Kamaraj plan, to ease out some powerful party CMs and Union ministers who were thought to be bottlenecks in the war ravaged Nehru government, was "proposed and implemented after transparent discussions in appropriate party

forums". Much before K Kamaraj presented his plan in a 1963 CWC meeting, the need for such a 'clean up' was proposed by the party president N Sanjeeva Reddy in previous AICC sessions followed by discussions in the subsequent plenum. "Even those who later argued that the plan was aimed at clearing the line of succession for Indira Gandhi never alleged that the plan was a hush hush affair as in the present resignation plot," a party leader said.

Another leader said the Kamaraj plan was conceptualised by 'towering leaders', who were ready to 'sacrifice their own positions to liberate the leadership from the clutches of party bosses' not to 'protect themselves from backlash as in the present case". Six CMs, includ-



Mrs Sonia Gandhi: Under attack

ing Kamaraj, and six Union ministers, including Jagjeevan Ram, Morarji Desai and Lal Bahadur Shastri, resigned in line with the proposal that those who had occupied offices in government for over a decade, other than Nehru, should leave.

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FORGIVE BUT DON'T FORGET

THE DECISION OF the Congress high command to drop disciplinary action against the rebels in Kerala led by the former Chief Minister, K. Karunakaran, seems to be the result of a pragmatic approach to the faction-ridden affairs of the party in the State. After having secured the victory of the official candidate in the recent Rajya Sabha election, the high command could have acted tough against the 20-odd MLAs still owing allegiance to Mr. Karunakaran. But the AICC president, Sonia Gandhi, appears to have factored in the long-term interests of the party in choosing to let off the MLAs with a warning. Although there would have been no immediate danger to the Antony Government even if all the rebel MLAs deserted the party, the Congress leadership wanted to use the opportunity of acting from a position of strength to make a call for unity. Any attempt to punish the dissident MLAs, who had defied the high command and voted for the rebel candidate in the Rajya Sabha poll, would only have precipitated the crisis in the Kerala unit of the party. With the dissidence now kept down to controllable levels, there was nothing to be gained from forcing the hand of Mr. Karunakaran. However, credit is also due to the Kerala Chief Minister, A. K. Antony, who pleaded for leniency in dealing with the supporters of Mr. Karunakaran, his arch-rival in the party. Obviously, he too saw no point in paving the way for a split. Especially since the prime objective of holding out against the factional pressures from Mr. Karunakaran had already been achieved.

Also, by divesting Ambika Soni of her charge of Kerala in the organisational reshuffle, the high command sent a message of reconciliation to the Karunakaran loyalists. Ms. Soni did not endear herself to the dissident group by her handling of the crisis prior to the Rajya Sabha poll. Although the tough attitude adopted by her was partly necessitated by the crisis period,

in the present phase, when the emphasis is on reconciliation, Ms. Soni would have been a liability in Kerala. With Ahamad Patel being given charge of the State, the dissidents have the chance to make a fresh beginning and rebuild bridges with the AICC. The high command also spared the KPCC president, K. Muralidharan, the son of Mr. Karunakaran. Although Mr. Muralidharan did not openly flout the high command's directives, there were indications that he was torn between loyalty to his father and the need to maintain unity in the ranks. Not surprisingly, Mr. Muralidharan was asked to rise above factional pressures "no matter how strong they may be". The high command was adopting a definite strategy in dealing with the dissidents. It will do what it must to quell open defiance of the leadership. Nothing less, but also, more importantly, nothing more than what it must.

Obviously, at the end of the crisis, the rebels have a lot to reflect upon. Many of them owe their political career to Mr. Karunakaran, and there is a binding factional loyalty. But, going by the current round of brinkmanship played out by Mr. Karunakaran, there is a case for the faction exerting pressure from within. The rebel leader would serve not only the party's, but also his faction's cause better by curbing the sense for misadventure fuelled by petty personal rivalries. As for the party high command, which handled the crisis with both firmness and understanding, this is no time for complacency. Having done the right thing by forgiving the dissidents, it should not forget that the factional differences in the State unit have only been papered over. If serious efforts are not made to address the issue of factionalism, keeping in mind the past experience, it would only be a matter of time before Mr. Karunakaran comes up with another grievance. And next time, the options would be fewer.

Congress Doldrums

Kamaraj plan 2003 gives Sonia

a chance to overhaul party

Resounding electoral reversals. Bitter factional feuds. Deepening differences with coalition partners. A leadership in the midst of its worst crisis of confidence. For the Congress, the past few weeks have been a case of the old Murphy's law: 'If anything can go wrong, it will'. Admittedly, many of the woes facing the Congress are not new. The spectre of dissidence in particular is perhaps as old as the party itself. But seldom in the past have the rebels seemed so brazenly defiant and the high command so powerless to deal with them. Admittedly, the anti-Amarinder mutiny in Punjab may never resemble the great Kerala rebellion of the last few months — thanks to the passage of the new Anti-defection Bill in the Lok Sabha — but it has severely dented the party's prospects. Meanwhile, in Maharashtra — perhaps the key battleground as far as the Congress's chances in the next general elections are concerned — it remains saddled with a coalition which looks more incoherent and dysfunctional with each passing day. Ironically, even in Delhi, the only state where the party managed to buck the anti-incumbency groundswell, the architect of the victory, Sheila Dikshit, was made to wait for a week, and drop a key minister, before being sworn in a second time.

Clearly, this is not the way of a party that is hanging together, much less one that is trying to regroup in the face of adversity. Given this, the role of the high command and, in particular, of party president Sonia Gandhi, is all important. While no one can argue with Ms Gandhi's attempt to give the Congress a new organisational style and culture — with greater autonomy to regional satraps and a general hands-off approach — the current crisis suggests that it's time for a course correction. If rampant dissidence and ideological confusion is the inevitable price of decentralisation, then it is a price too heavy to pay. In retrospect, it was either too naive or too ambitious for Sonia to think that she could so easily rewrite the rules of the old Congress game. A creature of habit, India's grand old party is too used to the idea of top-down authority to cherish autonomy. In this context, the mass resignations by party office-bearers over the weekend — in the nth re-enactment of the old Kamaraj plan in Congress history — gives Sonia her last great chance. She can either choose to lead from the front by going in for complete organisational overhaul or retreat behind a veil of pious consensualism by appointing yet more committees.

23 DEC 2003

'Honourable' Bhujbal exit

OUR BUREAU

Mumbai, Dec. 23: After braving a barrage of allegations about involvement in the stamp paper scam, Maharashtra deputy chief minister Chhagan Bhujbal today resigned over an attack on a television channel's office here.

A group of around 50 supporters of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) ransacked Zee Television Network's office for showing a programme critical of their leader, Bhujbal.

The deputy chief minister resigned owning up "moral responsibility" for the vandalism, the kind of which Mumbai is not unfamiliar with. Though it appeared that he was using the opportunity to step down without egg all over his face, Bhujbal denied that his decision was related to the stamp paper scandal.

"Even when I was not a minister, I was heavily critical of any such attacks on the media or Op-

position parties. Now when I am the home minister of the state... it is my responsibility to give protection," he said.

Under pressure to get rid of Bhujbal, NCP chief Sharad Pawar quickly called a news conference to emphasise the resignation was not related to the scam. "An attack on the media is a very serious issue," he said.

The Opposition, which picked Bhujbal for target practice in the just-concluded winter session of the Assembly, was not buying this version, though.

Narayan Rane of the Shiv Sena said: "He resigned because otherwise he would have been arrested.... He is lying even on his way out."

Rane had waved a letter in the Assembly purportedly written by an inspector, now behind bars for involvement in the scam, pointing a finger of accusation at Bhujbal.

This was followed by the law-

yer of Abdul Karim Telgi, the mastermind of the scam, firing the same allegation in Delhi last week.

It was clear that Bhujbal had become a liability for the government but, at the same time, quitting over such allegations would have meant accepting them to be true.

Now it seems the attack on Zee, in which 10 persons were hurt with two in hospital, sat heavier on his conscience than the weight of a scam that is at least as big as Rs 3,000 crore and could be 10 times that amount.

The deputy chief minister's supporters descended on the network's Andheri office, angry at Zee News reports on the scam and a programme on Alpha Marathi, which is a satire called *Ghadla Bighadla*.

On Sunday night, it showed a match-up in which Mr Armstrong (English for Bhujbal) was a puppet character.

Flurry of resignations in Ambika Soni-led camp

Sonia pulls curtains on quit show

OUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Dec. 21: Congress president Sonia Gandhi tonight drew the curtain down on a surprise resignation drama staged by the dominant Ambika Soni camp in the AICC to divert attention from the debate on the party's poll reverses.

Under pressure to own up responsibility for the debacle, the clique led by Soni, the most powerful AICC general secretary over the last couple of years, set off a flurry of resignations from their AICC positions as well as from the working committee.

"The party president rejected the offer of resignations of CWC members in the AICC set-up and asked them to continue to work for the party," a spokesman said, confirming the belief that the move did not have Sonia's blessing.

Other than Soni, those who had resigned included the Congress president's political secretary, Ahmad Patel, and Kamal Nath, a general secretary.

They sent their resignation letters to the party chief who had said on December 7 that she would "give a thought" to re-vamping her AICC team.

Party treasurer Motilal Vora and another general secretary, Mukul Wasnik, both identified with the Soni camp, followed suit. Vora said they resigned from their party posts and the CWC "to enable Soniaji to reconstitute her team".

Spokesperson Anand Sharma, however, said in a statement: "As and when the reorganisation is considered and required at an appropriate time, the same shall be communicated to the media."

The resignation moves came ahead of the second meeting of the CWC to discuss the poll shock. The meeting was to have been scheduled immediately after a five-member committee headed by Pranab Mukherjee submitted its report, expected shortly.

A mass resignation might have deflected attention from fixing responsibility. Indeed, since the resignations were also from the CWC, there was a question mark over it meeting at all to exclusively discuss the defeat.

The Soni camp also tossed up the idea of convening the AICC by the middle of next month, which, too, would have shifted focus from a debate on the poll results to organising the session.

Under attack for having presided over the loss in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, the Soni camp succeeded in rustling up a number of resignations. Vilasrao Deshmukh, a working committee member holding charge of Chhattisgarh, sent his following a call from Patel, who was persuading Vayalar Ravi, a general secretary who was away in Kerala, to do the same.

Mohsina Kidwai, a general secretary not associated with the camp, was apparently angry, but she, too, sent in her papers.

India's GOP sees resignation drama

By Rajesh Ramachandran
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Mired in inner-party squabbles and weakened by the recent rout in three assembly elections, key leaders in the Congress leadership have resigned, ostensibly to enable party president Sonia Gandhi to reshuffle organisational posts.

Kamal Nath and Moti Lal Vora, party general secretary and treasurer respectively, confirmed their resignations and indicated that other Congress Working Committee members would follow suit to let Ms Gandhi bring in a fresh team. This led to speculation that the CWC had resigned en masse.

However, Congress spokesperson Anand Sharma clarified that only "some of the office-bearers have volunteered their resignation to the Congress president to start the process of reconstitution of

the AICC. But the entire CWC has not resigned".

This "resignation drama", as Congress insiders put it, would either help Ms Gandhi bring in "Team 2004" to take on the BJP in the next general elections or let the present establishment, which has lost Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, continue with cosmetic changes.

Ms Gandhi's main advisers—general secretary Ambika Soni and political secretary Ahmed Patel—are also said to have resigned but they have not confirmed it. These resignations and the speculation of the entire CWC quitting, according to party insiders, is a

"pre-emptive act" by the Ms Soni-led group to stall the process of being held accountable for the party's debacle in the three states.

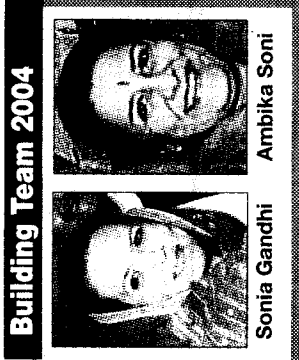
A CWC member, who has not quit, said: "Individuals are shirking accountability by suggesting that the entire CWC should resign. Ms Soni was in charge of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Instead of the party president routinely shifting out individuals, office-bearers have resigned together, implying collective leadership and responsibility. This could be to ensure a safe reinstatement in due course."

Many Congressmen feel this is a make or break situation for the party because there is not much time

left for the next general elections. Also, this AICC revamp would prove or disprove Ms Gandhi's dependence on the so-called coterie.

As Ms Soni's detractors demanded her ouster, others pointed at the earlier coterie led by Arjun Singh had also failed to deliver. In the current situation, Congressmen are looking for a genuine reshuffle of the general secretaries with at least 50 per cent fresh faces, which would bring in "experienced leaders, election managers and public faces capable of matching the Pramod Mahajan, Arun Jaitleys, Uma Bharati and Narendra Modis", said a Congress leader.

But these leaders feel that if Ms Gandhi goes back to rely on one coterie or the other, continuing with the corporate management style as against grassroots politics, it would be cakewalk for the BJP in the general elections.



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Many Congressmen feel this is a make or break situation for the party because there is not much time

'Development plank masks communal forces' hatred'

Sonia sings secular song to woo allies

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Dec. 13. — The shadow of her party's humiliating defeat in the recent Assembly polls hung on the Congress president's first prominent public engagement since the results, with secularism of the Nehruvian kind making a strong comeback in her speech to the faculty and students of Aligarh Muslim University today.

Ms Sonia Gandhi also argued that the BJP didn't have a development and governance plank, and made a strong pitch for allies. Without naming the BJP, Ms Gandhi said: "Let no one be misled by the mask of modernity and social justice frequently presented by the communal forces... they remain wedded to their agenda of hatred and divisiveness." With eyes on the next year's Lok Sabha election and keeping in mind the party's now-desperate need for allies, Ms Gandhi called upon "all secular and progressive forces to join

hands ... (and) together defeat those who subvert our Constitutional values behind a reformist veneer".

Ms Gandhi delivered her speech at a seminar on "Nehru and Nationalism", organised by the AMU's Centre for Nehru Studies in the university complex. On her first visit to AMU ever, she told the large gathering that her husband Rajiv Gandhi and her mother-in-law Indira Gandhi could never come to AMU. The family patriarch Jawaharlal Nehru, she noted, had visited the university last time in October 1963. The Congress chief paid her tribute to Nehru, saying: "More than anyone else (of Mahatma Gandhi's team) it was Nehru who laid the foundations of the modern Indian nation-state resting on the rule of law and the Constitution." She listed five elements of Nehru's vision of Indian nationalism — parliamentary democracy, secularism, planning and industrialisation, modern science

and technology and the foreign policy of non-alignment.

Ms Gandhi singled out "secularism as the Nehruvian pillar" which, she said, has come under "most severe attack" in recent years. "The assault on secularism continues unabated and takes many forms", she said. "Textbooks are being rewritten, institutions of excellence are being subverted, scholars are being hounded, and minorities are being targeted". She quoted Nehru: "If any person raises his hand to strike down another on the ground of religion, I shall fight him till the last breath of my life, both as the head of the government and from outside."

AMU was part of "India's intellectual and social renaissance in the late 19th century," Ms Gandhi said, adding the university had become a "symbol of repudiation of the two-nation theory".

■ Pranab may gain, page 10

Heptullah leaves House in a huff after Sibal wisecrack

Walkout boot on the other foot

12/12 OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Dec. 12: Najma Heptullah today stunned the Rajya Sabha by playing the role of the Opposition in the House she was presiding over.

The deputy chairperson of the Rajya Sabha walked out in a huff after an argument with her own party colleague Kapil Sibal, bringing into sharp focus the distance that has grown between her and the Congress over the last two years.

The abrupt — as well as unparalleled — departure came at the end of a long and acrimonious debate between the BJP and the Congress over information and broadcasting minister Ravi Shankar Prasad's remarks against Sonia Gandhi on the Ajit Jogi tape scandal.

After the members settled the issue, the House erupted a second time over a resolution that the BJP's Kripal Parmar planned to seek a ban on religious conversions. The matter came up during a discussion scheduled every Friday afternoon on private bills and resolutions.



Heptullah

The Congress' Pranab Mukherjee had spoken against Parmar's resolution. Sibal then sent a chit to the deputy chairperson seeking an opportunity to speak. After waiting for some time during which the ruling coalition's members spoke, Sibal stood up and said: "After you have allowed everyone to speak, give me a chance also."

The subtle sting — the lawyer in Sibal is known for such surgical strikes — touched a raw nerve in Heptullah and opened the floodgates.

"This is an insinuation. You are always arguing. This is not your courtroom. You cannot argue with me. It is a habit with you," exploded Heptullah, usually a picture of poise and charm. "I am not chairing the House. I am going to adjourn the House," she said and headed for the exit.

As she strode out, members on both sides of the House stood up in disbelief. Congress veterans like Manmohan Singh, Mukherjee and Ambika Soni gathered around Sibal. In the bustle, a few other Congress members went up to Sibal and shook hands with him.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

Heptullah

FROM PAGE 1

For several minutes after Heptullah stormed out, the members waited in the House, wondering whether it was in session or had been adjourned for the day. For the House to be adjourned, an explicit announcement has to be made, usually by the presiding officer — in this case Heptullah.

The suspense ended but without Heptullah when the House secretary-general, Yogender Narain, made the mandatory announcement: "The House is adjourned till Monday."

It is well known in political circles that there is no love lost between Heptullah and the Congress high command headed by Sonia Gandhi.

Several Congress leaders feel that the Rajya Sabha deputy chairperson, who has been in the House for more than a decade, is tilting closer to the BJP. Another reason for scepticism among the Congress faithful is her rapport with Sharad Pawar, a known Sonia-baiter.

The Congress was reluctant to give her a fresh lease of life in the Rajya Sabha. Rubbing salt into the wound, the party chose not to back her for the Vice-President's post when it fell vacant. Heptullah had stopped attending party meetings for the last two years.

BJP'S 'PARTISAN ATTITUDE' ATTACKED

Jogi's action cannot be condoned: Sonia

By K.V. Prasad

NEW DELHI, DEC. 9. The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, today expressed anguish over the developments in Chhattisgarh involving the former Chief Minister, Ajit Jogi, and said his act of handing over the letter of support "to a splinter group of Bharatiya Janata Party MLAs cannot be condoned."

"In the face of a clear verdict of the people and the fact that he had ceased to be the leader of the Congress Legislative Party, he should never have written the letter he did to the Governor, expressing the support of the Congress legislators for the splinter group of BJP MLAs," Ms. Gandhi told the general body of the Congress Parliamentary Party here.

Having acted swiftly against Mr. Jogi after the audio tape controversy erupted, Ms. Gandhi said that on the other allegations, the party was for a thorough and impartial investigation. The Chhattisgarh Government had already handed over the probe to the Central Bureau of Investigation.

She said the Congress Governments in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan were the victims of a strong anti-incumbency sentiment despite their acknowledged track record of achievement in growth and welfare. It was necessary to draw "appropriate lessons from our defeat" and prepare for the many challenges ahead.

Taking objection to the manner in which the BJP leadership had conducted the poll campaign, Ms. Gandhi said that it saw a "new low being reached" and alleged that the Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had never been so "blatantly partisan or condoned corruption so brazenly." She alleged that both he and his Cabinet colleagues had propagated "many falsehoods" and, contrary to claims, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad were very much part of the BJP campaign.

Turning to the problem in Assam and the killings of labourers from Bihar in the State, Ms. Gandhi alleged that one of the National Democratic Alliance

partners had also stoked violence in Mumbai on the issue of employment to the locals. She said the Assam and Bihar Governments had moved swiftly to restore social peace and harmony. In the context of the north-east, she warned that with the toppling of the Congress Government in Arunachal Pradesh, the party would have to be "extremely watchful" about what the BJP was doing in the region.

'PM must make statement on PSUs'

On the Chief Vigilance Commissioner's meeting with Mr. Vajpayee with regard to the functioning of Public Sector Undertakings, she demanded that the Prime Minister make a statement. The Government should take "visibly credible steps" to ensure that the commercial and managerial autonomy of the PSUs was fully respected and that the Ministers did not ignore the recommendations of the CVC.

Referring to the fake stamp paper scam, she said the BJP's claim that the Congress was opposed to a CBI inquiry was false. She recounted the steps taken by the Karnataka Government in the case.

The Government had dubbed the Dilip Singh Judev tapes "fabricated" and it had to be watched whether the CBI would be allowed to probe the matter in a free and fair manner.

Ridiculing the "outpouring of self-congratulations" from the NDA on the economic front, she said that despite the claims, unemployment continued to mount. On foreign affairs, she welcomed the peace initiatives between India and Pakistan.

CBI files case against Jogi, son

NEW DELHI, DEC. 9. The Central Bureau of Investigation today registered a case under the Prevention of Corruption Act against the former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister, Ajit Jogi, and his son, Amit Jogi, for allegedly trying to bribe BJP MLAs after the recent Assembly elections in the State.

An FIR was filed before a designated court against Ajit Jogi, Amit Jogi and the Congress MP, P.R. Kunte.

However, Mr. Jogi tonight described the case registered by the CBI as "baseless" and "false".

Hours after the CBI filed an FIR in the case, Mr. Jogi said, "The truth will come out if an impartial inquiry is conducted into the matter." — PTI

JOGI NOT ALLOWED TO ATTEND

Time for party to look forward, Sonia tells CWC

By K.V. Prasad

NEW DELHI, DEC. 7. The Congress today rallied behind its president, Sonia Gandhi, and its Governments voted out of power in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, while brushing aside the BJP's claim of promoting development.

Ms. Gandhi included herself among those responsible for the debacle in the three States and announced that a group of leaders would go into what was discussed for over seven hours at the Congress Working Committee meeting here and prepare a report within 10 days. The focus would be to gear up the Congress for the challenges ahead — the elections to the Lok Sabha and the Assemblies due next year.

Although the tape controversy relating to the former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister, Ajit Jogi, came on the eve of the meeting, the party said there was no discussion on the subject. It clarified that Mr. Jogi was suspended from the party for having handed over a letter of support without "due authorisation" of the central leadership. Mr. Jogi, who was not allowed to attend the CWC, was afforded an opportunity to state his case before some senior leaders later.

Ms. Gandhi set the tone at the meeting of the extended Working Committee suggesting it was time for the party to look forward and prepare for the challenges ahead instead of engaging in a round of pointing fingers.

In its resolution, the CWC expressed confidence that the Congress under the leadership of Ms. Gandhi would rise to the occasion to meet the challenges

with courage and conviction and that in this exercise all the "right-thinking progressive and secular forces will support the endeavours of the Congress."

Having affirmed its faith in the party leadership, the CWC noted that "failure or success in an election is a part of the political process... However, we must draw appropriate lessons and identify the reasons for the setback to take corrective measures."

The party alleged that "vulgar display" of financial resources indulged in by the BJP and the deployment of the RSS and VHP cadres may have paid electoral dividends, but given the track record of these organisations in spreading the communal virus, the emerging electoral trend was a matter of grave concern which, if not checked, was bound to pollute the political system. "It is ridiculous on the part of the BJP to claim that it won these elections on the slogans of development and good governance. A party having a monumental record of promoting communal disharmony and discord and fanning sectarianism cannot claim that suddenly development has become its primary agenda," the resolution noted.

Later, interacting with presspersons, Ms. Gandhi said that while there was no question of accepting the offer of resignation by the AICC general secretary, Ambika Soni, she would consider revamping the organisation in due course.

On the criticism that the inability of the Congress to ally with secular parties may have cost it dear, she said the party had gone by the judgment of its Chief Ministers on the issue.

Photograph on Page 11

THE HINDU

9 DEC 2003

THE HINDU

SONIA WITHDRAWS PROTECTING HAND

Cornered Jogi stands isolated

CL Manoj in New Delhi

No blame-game: Sonia

Dec. 7. — A day after the BJP returned complements on-tape to Mr Ajit Jogi, the man who has emerged as the fastest and most ambitious racer in the slippery Congress power-track in the recent time, stands completely isolated in the party and appears to be heading for political oblivion, at least for the time being.

After the action-filled night, the former Chhattisgarh chief minister arrived here this morning, reiterating his 'innocence', threatening legal action against those who "framed him", reposing faith and hope in the Congress leadership. But he appears to have lost the greatest source of his strength and success — the protective hand of Mrs Sonia Gandhi.

Even as Mr Jogi had filed a mercy plea before the Congress high command, the party leadership, especially Mrs Gandhi, appears smoothly distancing him as part of a two-pronged strategy; for the politically indefensible act of Mr Jogi's alleged on-tape act. Secondly, the party is deftly using its 'firm and timely action' against him as a political tool to defend itself against the mounting BJP and NDA attack and to paint before public the contrast 'between the Congress and the Judeo-defending BJP'.

Mr Jogi today said he had not discussed with the leadership before giving the letter of Congress support. He also accepted the leadership's decision to suspend him saying it would show the difference between the Congress and the BJP. Adhering to the principle of natural jus-

NEW DELHI, Dec. 7. — Even though Mr Digvijay Singh, Mr Ashok Gehlot and the state Congress presidents of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, like Mrs Ambika Soni, today owned up responsibility for the election debacle and offered their resignations at the seven-hour CWC introspection session, Mrs Sonia Gandhi turned down their offers, saying it wasn't the time for "blame-game" but "to focus on future tasks". — SNS

Details on page 4

tice, Mrs Gandhi today set up a committee comprising Mr Pranab Mukherjee, Dr Manmohan Singh and Mr Ahmed Patel, to allow Mr Jogi to present his case before them. But Mrs Gandhi refused to give Mr Jogi an audience despite his repeated efforts. Finally, he had to settle for a brief meeting with Mr Ahmed Patel in the morning where he was told not to come to attend the CWC meeting. The CWC, as a strategy, decided to skip the Jogi affair, as the three-member committee has been asked to submit the report within 10 days. Mr Jogi appeared before the committee late this evening.

Earlier, Mrs Soni refused to speak much on the episode saying Mr Jogi has been suspended and the committee will hear his version. However, she said 'it was regrettable' that leaders of the NDA government were taking credit for the sting-operation. Sources said as soon as the TV channels aired the Jogi tapes, a hugely embarrassed Mrs Gandhi asked Mrs Soni to fax him the suspension order and make it public.

THE STATESMAN

8 DEC 2003

CWC focus on damage control

MOHAN SAHAY
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Dec. 6. — With the Congress going deeper into crisis with the Ajit Jogi bribery scandal, the whole agenda of the CWC meeting tomorrow has turned upside down. What was billed to be a brainstorming session to take stock of the severe poll reverses would now be an immediate crisis management exercise.

As for the poll debacle, the Congress will blame the script and not the heroine. The CWC meeting, sources said, will reaffirm "full faith" in Mrs Sonia Gandhi and will blame, among others, some of the speeches that were written out for her

during the campaign. In one Rajasthan speech, for instance, Mrs Gandhi had said "government cannot be run by poetry", an obvious reference to the Prime Minister. Congress leaders now say such remarks did not go down well with the electorate. Some other "negative" speeches are also being highlighted to drive home the point that the party chiefs speech writers, not the poll managers, had done in the Congress.

The speech writers are certain to take the fall along with losing chief ministers. Sources said the CWC would take the view that since all CMs were given a virtual carte blanche on the selection of candidates, they'll have to accept a "large

share" of the blame. All three defeated CMs — Mr Digvijay Singh, Mr Ashok Gehlot and Mr Ajit Jogi — were scheduled to attend the CWC meeting. But Mr Ahmad Patel, Congress' chief's political secretary, tonight said Mr Jogi would not attend the meet.

One leader, considered not close to 10 Janpath, said anti-incumbency could be adopted as the clinching explanation "even though everyone knows that's not the whole story". Leaders seeking a more radical reappraisal say organisational rigidities should be addressed. Another issue being talked about is the absence of regular AICC brainstorming sessions.

THE STATESMAN

7 DEC 2003

Jogi offered money to split BJP: Jaitley

RAIPUR, DEC. 6. The Union Law Minister, Arun Jaitley, today alleged that the outgoing Chhattisgarh Chief Minister, Ajit Jogi, today offered money to the newly-elected BJP MLAs to defect and form a breakaway group which the Congress would support in government formation.

At a late night press conference here, Mr. Jaitley played a tape purportedly containing the conversation between Mr. Jogi and a BJP MLA to whom the money was alleged to have been offered.

Demanding a CBI inquiry into the entire episode, Mr. Jaitley played the tape and displayed currency to the tune of Rs. 45 lakhs, which had been allegedly given to the BJP MLAs, Virendra Pandey and Kashyap.

Mr. Jaitley said they had "wa-tertight" documentary material and taped evidence against Mr. Jogi, his son and the Congress MP, Kunte, for allegedly trying to bribe BJP MLAs to effect a split in the legislature party of the BJP and prevent formation of a BJP Government in the State.

Mr. Jaitley said both Mr. Jogi and Mr. Kunte were public servants and a case of corruption for defection had been clearly made out by the available evidence. He said the tape-recording was clear and the person trying to offer money to the MLAs was "unabashedly" offering the "bribe." There was also a handwritten letter by Mr. Jogi, he claimed.

Mr. Jaitley said they had handed over a copy of the tape to the Governor.

Since the outgoing Government was still in office till tomorrow morning, the party would hand over the original documents, the tape and other evidence to police for investigation after the new dispensation takes over. He said this was a clear case of attempt to break a political party and prevent formation of a Government. He also demanded the arrest of Mr. Jogi and Mr. Kunte.

Mr. Jaitley alleged that the entire conspiracy had been hatched at the instance of the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi. "Her own role is there and her name is being used," he said. "The conspirator should be arrested," he said. — PTI

Cong. to suspend Jogi

NEW DELHI, DEC. 6. The Congress tonight decided to suspend the outgoing Chhattisgarh Chief Minister, Ajit Jogi, following the allegation by the BJP that he had attempted to bribe BJP MLAs to split the party.

"The party has taken a serious note of it and is sending a notice of suspension to Jogi," the Congress general secretary, Ambika Soni, said shortly after Mr. Jaitley had made the allegation in Raipur. — PTI

THE HINDU

7 DEC 2008

Sonia under pressure to remove PCC chief in Kerala

Saroj Nagi
New Delhi, December 6

THE AICC is coming under pressure to remove K Muraleedharan as Kerala PCC chief to enable the party to repair the damage in the state unit ahead of the 2004 Lok Sabha polls.

The party is also getting reconciled to the idea of a possible split should Muraleedharan's removal induce his father K. Karunakaran to float a separate outfit to achieve his objective of removing Chief Minister A.K. Antony. The issue is expected to come up in Sunday's CWC meeting.

Meanwhile, a section believes that Karunakaran has a greater potential to damage the party from within by sabotaging the party's prospects in its winning seats. But, they feel, as a leader of a separate outfit, he wouldn't get the Congress' votes. His own supporters are reportedly wary of his plans to join forces with the CPI (M), with the number of his MLAs slipping from 27 to 19.

Muraleedharan's removal is sought on the ground that the PCC must function as part of the AICC. "We can't have a PCC chief who thinks of floating a new outfit and aligning with the CPI (M). The authority of the High Command has to be asserted," said a leader.

In a day of hectic consultations that spells some corrective action soon, Congress chief Sonia Gandhi met UDF convener Oomen Chandy and Muraleedharan separately. On Friday night, she spoke to Karunakaran, now in hospital. Antony, too, called on the ailing leader.

Pranab Mukherjee, Ahmed Patel and R.K. Dhavan held a series of meetings with Kerala leaders to resolve the crisis stemming from Karunakaran's demand for Chief Minister A.K. Antony's ouster, even as pressure mounted for removing K. Muraleedharan as KPCC chief. Antony, meanwhile, called on Karunakaran in hospital.

7/10

BAD TIMES

7/12

Mr Ajit Jogi seemed to have been his own worst enemy. When awareness dawned on the Congress, especially after the exit polls, that the party was less the target of the voter's projected lack of faith than the chief minister, it came too late to be effective. The Congress was not a patch on the Bharatiya Janata Party in the matter of campaigning in these assembly elections. The only exception was perhaps Delhi, where the BJP was comparatively low-key. In Chhattisgarh, the BJP threw everything it had into the battle of rhetoric, banners and slogans and, amazingly, Mr Jogi and his men failed to see what was coming. Their confidence made the Congress campaigning in the state somewhat lackadaisical. For a chief minister who has obviously raised the hackles of just too many people by his abrasive style, this was suicidal.

It is difficult to say, though, what could have saved the Congress. Mr Jogi had been efficient, it is true, in different ways. Early in his tenure, he had successfully split the state BJP. The party has since considered him its "wildest" foe. But Mr Jogi has also improved roads, reduced the state's administrative expenses, doubled seats in engineering colleges, seen to the building of three excellent hospitals — in other words, his development record for the newborn state was not bad at all. Unfortunately, this kind of multi-faceted efficiency is plagued with inbuilt problems. Now he is facing a bribery charge and has been suspended from the Congress, both consequences of his aspiration to efficiency. The leader of the tribal segment had begun to lose credibility ever since he was accused of forging his tribal identity. Tribal politicians did not even want him as leader of the opposition before his suspension. Another sin that grew on him was the promotion of his family, especially his son. The minority chief minister, tribal and Christian, managed to lose his party voters rather than gaining them. His personality cult and coterie favouritism, conducted in true feudal spirit, neutralized much that he represented and the good things he did. Add to this his party's usual bungling, and the Congress's fate was sealed. It even messed up the favourable fallout of Mr Dilip Singh Judeo's exposure. The BJP not only got away with claiming that Mr Jogi had engineered a frame-up, but it also succeeded in creating a sympathy wave for the *Hindutva* man who specializes in fulminating against Christians. The extremist threat, especially in Bastar, fizzled out during polling day, the simmering hostility against Mr Jogi did not.

Cong must apologise, says BJP

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, November 22

BUOYED BY chief vigilance commissioner (CVC) P. Shankar's clarification that he had not named any ministers for the misuse of PSUs, the BJP on Saturday attacked the Congress for making "wild allegations" and asked it to apologise publicly.

BJP president Venkaiyah Naidu said the Congress was rattled by the prospect of imminent defeat in the coming elections and was resorting to "spit and run tactics" to create controversies and divert people's attention from its failures.

"We demand that the Congress apologise to the Presi-

dent (to whom it submitted a memorandum), the nation, the six ministers named by it as well as the BJP for creating an unnecessary controversy," he said.

The Congress's move to go public with the names of six ministers in the controversy over political interference in the functioning of PSUs seemed to backfire on Saturday with the CVC's clarification.

Shankar, who hitherto maintained a studied silence on the issue, gave a clean chit to Commerce Minister Arun Jaitley, whom the Congress had charged along with five others for "milking" PSUs attached to their ministries.

PSU SELL-OFF CONTROVERSY

Charges denied

REJECTING CHARGES, of the Congress, the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Ltd in a statement on Saturday denied any pressure either from the Union or Bengal power ministries on the PSU's functioning.

The CVC told PTI that going by the reputation of ministers like Jaitley nothing could be said against them.

"The reports that I have named ministers, especially Arun Jaitley and Ram Naik, are wild, baseless and totally absurd. Absolutely no names were taken," Shankar said. "I hoped that with the PM's statement last week (that no names figured in their meeting), the issue would be given a burial. It's unfortunate that it is being discussed even now," he said.

Shankar said he generally discussed vigilance matters with the PM to clear the air about investigations over which there were some misgivings. The discussions also touched upon decision-making in PSUs, interference and autonomy for executives.

On his part, Jaitley, who

has served a legal notice on a Telugu daily, which originally named him and five others, said the Congress has come out as a "joker" in the pack. "They misused the opportunity of an audience with the highest functionary (the President), gave him a memorandum based on falsehood and thereafter addressed the country on the basis of that falsehood," he said.

But the Congress persisted with the charges. Spokesman Jaipal Reddy said the government was "reducing morality to technicality" because the CVC hasn't denied naming the PSUs and drawing the PM's attention to political interference in their functioning.

We'll not accept Sonia, Priyanka as PM: Pawar

NEW DELHI, NOV. 21. Asserting that his party will not accept the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, as Prime Minister after the next general elections, the Nationalist Congress Party president, Sharad Pawar, has said the main Opposition party should change its leader to keep the BJP out of power.

"Difficult... We will not accept her as Prime Minister. The Congress has to change its leader," Mr. Pawar said in an interview to the journalist, Karan Thapar, on BBC World's HardTalk India programme.

Asked if he would support a Government led by Ms. Gandhi in case of a hung Lok Sabha and keeping the BJP out, Mr. Pawar said: "the Congress should think if they are serious about keeping the BJP out. It should not insist on the leader. My suggestion is that the Congress should keep the BJP out and elect any other person to lead."

He also ruled out accepting Priyanka Gandhi as a possible Member of Parliament... She has not proved her mettle and is not accepted by the country."

However, he said that his party would not have any problem aligning with the Congress, ei-

ther at the state-level or even at the national-level, provided it did not insist on "imposing its leader."

"For state matters, no problem. In Delhi, if there is no discussion and no insistence about the leadership, no problem." "The Congress has no right to thrust its leader on us and should not expect others to accept its leader."

The NCP chief, who parted ways with the Congress on the issue of Ms. Gandhi's foreign origin, said he had no problem with the Nehru-Gandhi family. "I had worked in the party when Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi were Prime Ministers," Mr. Pawar said he had a "very good" relationship with many Congressmen. "I cannot disclose their names because that will put them in danger and seal their fate. That is why I cannot disclose their names."

The NCP leader said his disagreement with the Congress was not restricted to the leadership issue but extended to economic policies too. Differences with the Congress over issues and policies had grown considerably since he was expelled from the party in 1999, he added.

"There are a number of fac-



vice-chairman of the Crisis Management Committee because of his closeness to the BJP. Mr. Pawar, who was the Leader of the Opposition in April 1999 when the Vajpayee Government fell, said it was "normal parliamentary practice" for the Leader of the Opposition to be invited to form the Government. He said, Ms. Gandhi had not consulted him as Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha or his counterpart in the Rajya Sabha before staking claim to form the Government after the fall of the Vajpayee Government. Soon after the Vajpayee Government fell he did try to form an alternative government.

"I tried to secure the support of the Samajwadi Party chief, Mulayam Singh Yadav, and the Samajwadi Janata Party chief, Chandra Shekhar, for the Congress, though not for Ms. Gandhi."

The NCP leader replied in the affirmative when asked if he was seriously thinking of supplanting Ms. Gandhi and becoming the Prime Minister as he was the Leader of the Opposition.

He said, Ms. Gandhi had "continuously stressed" that she was not a candidate for the

Prime Minister. She was the party president but not a member of either House.

However, Mr. Pawar said without discussing with him or his counterpart in the Rajya Sabha, Ms. Gandhi met the President and staked claim to form the Government.

Mr. Pawar said that he would not be disappointed if he never became a Prime Minister. "The highest office in the country is not the only thing."

Asked if he would be a satisfied man even if he does not become a Prime Minister, the NCP chief said "absolutely." — UNI

NCP a one-issue party, says Cong.

NEW DELHI, NOV. 21. The Congress today refused to comment on the Nationalist Congress president, Sharad Pawar's suggestion of replacing Sonia Gandhi as its president.

"We need not react to the remark made by Mr. Pawar," the Congress chief spokesperson, S. Jaipal Reddy, told reporters here.

"There is no point in reacting time and again to the [offensive] remark of Mr. Pawar. The NCP is a one-issue party."

— UNI

Showcause slapped for code abuse

9-8-03
✓

Sonia flies into EC thunder

F1
19/11

OUR BUREAU

New Delhi, Nov. 18: Sonia Gandhi has tasted the feared whiplash of J.M. Lyngdoh, who has asked the Congress why its recognition as a national party should not be suspended or withdrawn.

The showcause was slapped after the Election Commission concluded that Congress president Sonia and Chhattisgarh chief minister Ajit Jogi had "violated" the model of conduct by using state government aircraft during campaigning.

It said an aircraft and a helicopter owned by the government had been used by Sonia, Jogi and Madhya Pradesh Speaker Shrinivas Tiwari in violation of its specific directives.

The panel noted that Sonia had used the helicopter on October 10 to travel from Chhattisgarh's capital Raipur to several places, including Sriperumbudur, where her husband Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. The model code came into force from October 6.

The showcause notice, made public after a full poll panel meeting chaired by chief election commissioner Lyngdoh, has been sent to the Congress headquarters at 24 Akbar Road.

The violations are clubbed under Section 16A of the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order which mandates suspension or withdrawal of the recognition of a political party if



Sonia Gandhi with Ajit Jogi at Raipur airport on Tuesday. (PTI)

it fails to follow the commission's "lawful directions".

The commission has asked the Congress to reply to the notice within seven days. "If the party does not reply in seven days, it will be presumed that the Congress has nothing to say in the matter and the Election Commission will take appropriate action without further reference to the Congress," the notice added.

The Congress asserted that Sonia had "definitely not used" any of the Chhattisgarh government aircraft ever since the model code of conduct went into force. AICC media secretary Tom Vadakkan said that on the contrary, Sonia was "absolutely correct" in her travel itinerary after the code came into force.

About Jogi, he said: "We have

just received the notice from the Election Commission and we are cross-checking it."

The commission said it had received "several" complaints that aircraft belonging to the state government were being "misused" for campaigning by Congress leaders.

The commission has found that state government aircraft have been used on and after October 6 up to November 12 as many as 10 times.

The commission recalled having declared that there would be an absolute ban on the use of aircraft owned by a state or hired at state cost for any reason, including security, and no exception would be made, except in the case of the Prime Minister. The rule was set to ensure a level-playing field for all parties.

Cong may upset Mulayam govt over Babri affidavit

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 17 NOVEMBER

HOLDING back its guns, the Congress, on Monday, assiduously avoided a confrontation with Samajwadi Party until chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav retraced his steps to "clear the misunderstanding," by washing his hands off the affidavit filed on behalf of the UP government in the Babri Masjid case.

The Congress move — even as it maintained that "it had been prepared to review its support for SP, irrespective of the consequences" had Mulayam backed the affidavit — indicates its re-

luctance to fall into BJP's trap by elbowing Mr Yadav out of the "secular" spectrum.

Party leaders here pointed to the attack against Mr Yadav on Monday morning by Congress state unit functionaries as evidence of the party's intention to resist any dilution of its commitment to fight BJP. In fact, party managers sought to explain that Congress would have gained had Mulayam stood by the affidavit.

Contending that the action would have exposed SP's vital links with BJP, they projected that this would have resulted in Muslims deserting SP.

"It would have vacated the secular
space
for Con-

gress. We are rather unhappy that Mr Yadav has retraced his steps, we were happy with the development earlier," an AICC functionary said.

The tall talk notwithstanding, it is evident that Congress would have liked to take no such step since it would have alienated a party as important as SP. Mr Yadav could prove to be the vital ladder for Ms Sonia Gandhi's climb to the Prime Minister's chair in the post-poll scenario.

The party has been enduring Mulayam Singh — notwithstanding his refusal to back Ms Gandhi's prime ministerial claims — because of the widely held perception that SP was able to form a government in UP because of help from BJP.

The Economic Times

18 NOV 2003

18 NOV 2003

Telgi scam won't affect poll prospects, says Congress

Saroj Nagi
New Delhi, November 15

CONGRESS PRESIDENT Sonia Gandhi on Saturday said the fake stamp paper scam would not be an issue in the forthcoming Assembly elections even as the BJP intends to make it one. The scam, spread across six states and several years, however, appears to be rocking the Congress-NCP coalition in Maharashtra.

But when asked if the scam would affect the Congress adversely in the polls, Sonia replied: "Why should it affect the forthcoming elections? Our stand is very clear. All those involved need to be brought to book."

The Congress president, who stressed that no protection should be given to those guilty of the criminal operation, was speaking to newsmen during the Iftar party she hosted on Saturday.

The first VVIP Iftar of the season, Sonia's get-together was a low-key affair, with most leaders of the non-NDA parties invited to it unable to make it because of the forthcoming Assembly elections. BSP's Mayawati, SP's Mulayam Singh Yadav, NCP's Sharad Pawar and Left leaders like H.S. Surjeet and A.B. Bard-



Sonia Gandhi

han were noticeable absentees though Rashid Alvi (BSP) and Amar Singh (SP) were present. Another noticeable absentee was Priyanka Vadra. As were the TV cameras, which were not allowed into the venue.

With Iftars no longer making a strong political statement, the Congress chief's informal interaction with scribes gave an inkling of the fluidity of the present political scenario. The Telgi scam seems to have added to it, with the Congress caught in a piquant situation on its efforts to put the BJP on the mat on the PSU unit. The Congress, which said it would petition the President on Saturday to help get the

names of the ministers seeking undue favours from the PSUs, held back its decision. "We are waiting for the Prime Minister's response (to our demand)," Sonia said to a query.

While the party has called for a parliamentary probe into the matter, its chief minister in Karnataka rejected a CBI probe into the stamp paper racket. According to Sonia, he felt the state investigating authorities were doing a competent job. She indicated Maharashtra would take a similar view but said it was for the chief minister to decide.

The Congress president was confident of her party's good performance in the polls to the four states ruled by it. On MP, she said she would go—as she did in 1998—by Chief Minister Digvijay Singh's assessment that the party would win. But she was non-committal on the question of possible snap polls to the Lok Sabha.

She dubbed the possibility of a tie-up with the BSP as "futuristic" and saw the situation as "fluid" for a pre-poll understanding with the Left in Andhra. She declined to answer any questions on the crisis in the Congress unit in Kerala and said that the process of discussion was on over demands over the Telengana issue.

Cong reopens list of 120 names

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, November 5

PRESSURE FROM the rank and file, as well as senior party leaders, forced the Congress to reopen the list of 120 names reportedly shortlisted by the Manmohan Singh-led five-member screening panel for Rajasthan. The committee, which met for three consecutive days, will now offer an additional and alternative name for all the 200 Assembly seats.

Unless the panel completes the task, the exercise might spill over to Thursday. The final list will be prepared at the November 7-8 meeting of the Central Election Committee, chaired by Sonia Gandhi. The party may, however, withhold announcing about 15-20 names till the last "for tactical reasons".

The decision to offer alternative names for all the seats came in the wake of protests over "leaks of names of selected candidates" even as the screening panel was still vetting the biodatas and the CEC had yet to meet. At another level, it would allow the party to juggle with its candidates keeping in mind who the BJP fielded.

But this has further extended the selection process. The Pradesh Election Committee, which normally sifts biodatas and recommends names, had passed on the responsibility to the screening panel. By giving alternative names, the panel, too, has now transferred the responsibility to the CEC.

Notwithstanding this, the Madhya Pradesh pattern is expected to be followed in Rajasthan, too, with only one member of a political family being allowed to contest. Accordingly, senior

Playing it safe

- Screening panel will now offer an additional and alternative name for all the 200 Assembly seats
- The final list will be prepared at the November 7-8 meeting of the Central Election Committee, chaired by Sonia Gandhi
- The party may, however, withhold announcing about 15-20 names till the last for tactical reasons
- The Congress might also juggle with its candidates keeping in mind who the BJP fields
- The party, meanwhile, has turned to dinner diplomacy to solicit the support of party leaders from Rajasthan over ticket distribution



Sonia Gandhi

leaders, like Nawal Kishore Sharma and Parasram Maderna, are said to be opting out in favour of their sons.

According to Ambika Soni, AICC general secretary in charge of Rajasthan, the party would, in comparison to 1998, field more new faces, women and candidates from the minority community. The party had, for instance, fielded 16 women last time of whom 13 had won.

With the BJP fielding its chief ministerial nominee Vasundhara Raje from Jhalapatan, the Congress could consid-

er changing its sitting legislator and first-timer Mohanlal Rathore with a "stronger" candidate to pin her down. The Congress could experiment with an OBC, or, perhaps, even a minority leader in order to rally the other castes against the Rajputs.

The Congress, meanwhile, has turned to dinner diplomacy to solicit the cooperation of senior party leaders from Rajasthan over the distribution of tickets ahead of the party's crucial Central Election Committee meeting on Friday.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

6 NOV 2007

6 NOV 2007

Sharma convicted, faces life or death ^{9/11}

TIMES NEWS NETWORK ^{9/11}

New Delhi: A city court on Monday held former Youth Congress leader Sushil Sharma guilty of killing his wife, Naina Sahni, and burning her body in the tandoor (oven) of a restaurant here on July 2, 1995.



Sushil Sharma

The sentence, which could be a life term or a death sentence, will be announced on Wednesday. Besides pronouncing Sharma guilty, additional sessions judge G.P. Thareja held his accomplice and restaurant manager, Keshav Kumar, guilty of conspiring with Sharma to dispose of Sahni's body in the tandoor of Baghiya restaurant at Ashok Yatri Niwas. Kumar, who has been in jail for eight years, may get a life sentence.

The court, however, acquitted the other three accused—Jai Prakash Pehlwaan, Rishi Raj Rathi and Ram Prakash Sachdeva—of charges of harbouring Sharma for lack of evidence. Mr Thareja also directed the chief metropolitan magistrate to prosecute Gujarat cadre IAS officer D.K. Rao, then resident commissioner of Gujarat Bhavan, for harbouring Sharma after the murder.

Thareja also asked the chief secretary of Gujarat Bhavan to take appropriate administrative steps for "dereliction of duty" by employees here. After the murder, the police said, Sharma went to Jaipur, Mumbai and then to Chennai and got anticipatory bail.

MORE ON OUR WEBSITE

9/11
Murder of
Eight Years Later

visit www.timesofindia.com

Varun Gandhi 'denied entry' into Shakti Sthal

Press Trust of India
New Delhi, October 31

Feroze Varun Gandhi, son of former Congress leader Sanjay Gandhi, claimed on Friday that Delhi Police prevented him from entering "Shakti Sthal" to pay respects to his grandmother Indira Gandhi on her death anniversary, a charge denied by the cops.

Lodging a strong protest, Varun shot off a letter to Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit demanding an apology as her government was the official host of the memorial service.

"In spite of having passes for myself and a group of people, we were harassed and physically prevented from entering by the police," Varun said.

Dikshit later said she had no role in the security arrangements at the venue.

"I am not even aware of the incident," she said.

Rejecting Varun's demand for apology, the chief minister said her government had no role in security which is a concern of Delhi Police. "It is for police to give an explanation," she said.

He claimed that the police turned him away on the pretext that he posed a security risk. "Since the police were obviously acting under orders, I will like to lodge an extremely serious protest. While the Delhi government may have its political compulsions, it cannot act in this arrogant, partisan and unlawful manner," he said.

Denying that Varun Gandhi was heckled by the cops, a Delhi Police spokesman said Varun arrived along with 70-80 supporters at the point where Vice-President Bharion Singh Shekhawat and Con-

gress president Sonia Gandhi were scheduled to come.

The spokesman said Varun insisted that all of them should be allowed in from the special gate, which was not possible. At the intervention of senior police officers, Varun, along with nine others, was allowed to enter the memorial site through the special gate, he said.

However, after the entry, Varun was asked to leave the nine people accompanying him behind at the seating places while he could proceed to the special enclosure, despite not having the requisite pass.

On this, Varun insisted that his men would sit with him, which was not acceptable to either Delhi Police or Special Protection Group, the spokesman said and added that after the denial of permission to sit in the special enclosure for his men, he

left quietly from the venue.

Varun, however, said in his letter that "it may be a political occasion, but for the family involved, it remains a personal one. Political vendetta must not be mixed up with family occasions and points sought to be scored in this petty and unbecoming fashion".

Varun said, "I expect an immediate apology, an assurance that such conduct will never occur again towards me or any other member of the family and strict action against, whoever, was responsible for this shameful incident."

The nation on Friday paid homage to Indira Gandhi on her 19th death anniversary. All-religion prayer meetings, garlanding of her statues and forming of human chains championing national integration marked the occasion.



Sonia Gandhi on her way to Shakti Sthal with son Rahul to attend a function to commemorate Indira Gandhi's death anniversary on Friday.

Sonia iftaar

Congress president Sonia Gandhi is planning to take time off her poll campaign for an iftaar party on November 12

Always a media event, Sonia's iftaar this year will be watched closely in the context of her party's Shimla resolve to bring together the country's secular forces

As for the PM, sources said he would be away to Russia from November 11-16. On returning home, he would launch himself into an 11-day election campaign. It remains to be seen if he squeezes in an iftaar bash between electioneering in Rajasthan, MP, Delhi and Chhattisgarh

The elections to the four Hindi-belt states with a sizeable Muslim population are bound to encourage parties to organise iftaar feasts

AICC to showcase four Kerala ministers

HTC and Agencies
New Delhi, October 26

THE AICC is planning to issue showcase notices to four ministers in Kerala in the wake of the party's debacle in the Ernakulam Lok Sabha bypoll.

AICC sources here, while declining to give the names of the four, said they will be asked whether they made certain statements that were being viewed against the party by the central leadership.

However, Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee president K. Muraleedharan said he did not think that serving showcase notices would defuse the crisis in the state unit of the party. "I don't think troubles in the party would be solved by issuing show-cause notices to a few persons," Muraleedharan said from Kozhikode.

He said AICC general secretary Ahmed Patel, in charge of the state party affairs, had called him and in-

formed about the matter.

Reports had it that the party was to slap showcase notices to Kadavur Sivadasan, P. Sankaran, K.V. Thomas and K. Sudhakaran for indulging in "indiscipline" by making public statements in the wake of the party's defeat. While Sivadasan and Sankaran belong to the Karunakaran faction, the other two are from rival camps.

Infighting in Congress in Kerala has, of late, assumed fratricidal dimensions with

Karunakaran and anti-Karunakaran factions hurling charges at each other at parallel conventions organised across the state.

P. Sankaran, Health Minister in A.K. Antony Cabinet, claimed he did not utter a single word of criticism against the chief minister or the government in any public forum. "All that I did was to praise the services of Karunakaran to the party and to the nation. If somebody in Kerala wants action

against me for praising Karunakaran, I am ready to face action," Sankaran said.

He said he had sufficient knowledge of the Constitution on how to conduct as a member of the Cabinet.

"I have never compromised on the decency and decorum expected of me as a minister," he said. "But if praising the services of my leader (Karunakaran) to the party and the nation is a sin, I will continue to commit that sin," he added.



Karunakaran



Sonia Gandhi

Pawar-less Congress

9/11/03 15/10 458
Sonia will always be a question mark

Even if Maharashtra's Congress-Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) government survives the partners' mutual threats, the problem won't go away. Worse, for the Congress, it will grow as election tempo builds up and may assume unsolvable status post-general elections. If Sharad Pawar, running a government with the Congress, can use rhetoric as strong as "imported leadership" when referring to Sonia Gandhi, the hope that other Opposition leaders will keep quiet must be considered unrealistic. Indeed, with the exception of two former chief ministers, who have had the distinction of running their states to the ground, no one in the Opposition seems to have a unclouded view of Ms Gandhi's leadership. Jyoti Basu and Laloo Yadav however cannot by themselves put the Congress back to power in the Centre. That means the Congress will forever be a hostage to prospective and actual coalition partners sniping at its leader. Or it must, as it is threatening the NCP, ditch all allies and go it alone. But suppose the Congress overcomes all these and wins the next Lok Sabha polls, at which point Ms Gandhi will become the first foreign-born Prime Minister of a democracy of one billion people. Will her, and her party's, troubles be over? Hardly.

She will be vulnerable on every national security issue — that may or may not be fair, but that is how politics is. Plus, as Prime Minister, Ms Gandhi simply will not be allowed the medieval grand seclusion that she enjoys as Congress president. It is a harsh but true assessment of Ms Gandhi that questions about where she was born get stronger every time she speaks. In a rambunctious democracy, the putative ruling party should not be looking at a prime ministerial candidate like that.

But, of course, the Congress will learn only through dreadful experience. The fall of the Maharashtra government, if it happens, should be counted as one. Congress-NCP differences have appeared over issues other than those directly linked to Ms Gandhi's leadership. The NCP did not follow the Congress line on boycotting George Fernandes in Parliament. It had strong reservations over the Congress-sponsored no-confidence motion. Pawar's partymen kept away from the Solapur byelection campaign, contributing partially to the BJP's big win in the Lok Sabha seat. Pawar is also looking at keeping his base in Maharashtra intact and expanding elsewhere and he reckons coming too close to the Congress may not help. He also knows that he has less to lose from losing the Maharashtra government than the Congress. For the latter, the loss of this politically and political fund raising-wise key state months before the general elections will be a huge set back. The Congress will have made the point about its leader, but only at the cost of the party.

Cong.-NCP alliance under strain

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, OCT. 12. The standoff between the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party over Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin issue appears to have cast a shadow on the working arrangement between the two parties in Maharashtra, with some leaders even talking about a break-up of the alliance.

The Congress MP from Maharashtra, Suresh Kalmadi, today openly demanded that the Congress snap its ties with the NCP and go it alone. Mr. Kalmadi, who is the treasurer of the Congress Parliamentary Party, charged that the NCP chief, Sharad Pawar, was in touch with the BJP and that the NCP workers were keen on joining the Congress.

The AICC has taken seriously Mr. Pawar's statement that the Congress had an "imported" leadership. The party general secretary, Ambika Soni, today said: "Congress workers across the country were agitated over the remarks and the Maharashtra unit chief's ultimatum to the NCP and statements of other State leaders was a manifestation of this."

The NCP said it saw no reason to revise its stand on Ms. Gandhi's foreign origin, with its general secretary, Tariq Anwar, stating that the Congress was aware of the NCP stand at the time both parties decided to join hands and run a coalition government in Maharashtra.

"The Congress had then not imposed any condition that we should drop or change this stand," Mr. Anwar told *The Hindu*.

He felt that the threat held out by the Maharashtra Congress unit was an election-oriented rhetoric.

Congress-NCP relations turned bitter after the recent electoral reversal in the Solapur Lok Sabha byelection. Party leaders accused the NCP of not putting its weight behind the Congress candidate and charged that Mr. Pawar had deliberately re-

frained from campaigning.

Congress sources said Mr. Pawar raising the "foreign origin" issue in the run-up to the Assembly elections to five States was important, especially since he maintained all along that it was an issue relevant only for the Lok Sabha polls.

The Congress is seeking to retain power in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, and the NCP has announced its decision to contest in all these States.

Setback to anti-BJP forces: Page 11

Pawar toughens stand

NEW DELHI, OCT. 12. The NCP chief, Sharad Pawar, today rejected the Congress ultimatum to abandon the issue of the AICC president, Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin and said it was free to take any decision, including snapping its ties with the NCP in Maharashtra.

A day after the Maharashtra Congress chief, Ranjit Deshmukh, asked the NCP to rethink its stand on Ms. Gandhi's foreign origin or face the withdrawal of the party from the Democratic Front coalition, Mr. Pawar told reporters in Shirur that there was no question of giving up the issue or diluting his party's stand on it.

He said:

"We sincerely feel that our country with a population of 100 crores has enough competent leaders to rule it and we do not need any foreign leader. We had to leave the party and form the NCP because we dared to raise the issue of Sonia's foreign origin.

"As long as they want to run the DF Government, we will run it. If they don't want to run it, we have no problems."

Reacting to Mr. Pawar's remarks, the Maharashtra Chief Minister, Sushilkumar Shinde, said the NCP, as a partner in the ruling coalition, must desist from speaking against "our top leadership". — PTI

NCP guns for Sonia, defies Cong deadline

Congmen skip meet with Pawar

TIMES NEWS NETWORK
AND AGENCIES

PuneMumbai: Unfazed by the Congress' ultimatum to clarify on the issue of Sonia Gandhi's leadership, Nationalist Congress Party chief Sharad Pawar reiterated on Sunday that the NCP would never accept a person of foreign origin as Prime Minister and dared its coalition partner in Maharashtra to relinquish power by pulling out of the alliance.

On Saturday, state Congress chief Ranjit Deshmukh had asked the NCP to clarify its stand on Sonia Gandhi's leadership in seven days. He warned that if Ms Gandhi's leadership was not acceptable to NCP, it should relinquish power in the state.

Mr Pawar said the NCP had entered into an alliance with the Congress in the state to ensure that communal forces did not come to power, but "both parties reserve the right to criticise one another at the national level".

"We are still firm on our stand that no individual of foreign origin should become the country's PM," he said, adding, "If the Congress does not agree with our stand it should step down from power in Maharashtra."

He was speaking to newsmen at Shirur, near Pune, after inaugurating a hospital. Apart from NCP leaders, CWC member Vilasrao Deshmukh and deputy leader of the party in the Lok Sabha, Shivraj Patil, were scheduled to attend the function. However, they stayed away.

Mr Pawar said there were "many senior leaders" in the

Congress and that the NCP was ready to accept their leadership. Mr Pawar also indicated that if required, the NCP was ready to fight the forthcoming elections in the state on its own. He said Ms Gandhi's foreign origin would be a major poll issue for his party.

Backing up Mr Pawar, his close aide and NCP spokesman Praful Patel said there was no question of his party giving any clarification or tendering an apology for its stand on the issue of Ms Gandhi's foreign origin.

"We do not have to give clarification to anyone. If the Congress feels that it should not

stay in government (in Maharashtra), it has a right to that decision," he said.

Meanwhile, chief minister Sushilkumar Shinde on Sunday asked the NCP to desist from making

remarks against the Congress' top leadership. "We are running a coalition government in Maharashtra and the NCP should respect our party leadership. They should think before making any statement against our leader," Mr Shinde said.

On the other hand, Congress parliamentary party treasurer Suresh Kalmadi favoured snapping the party's alliance with the NCP and said it was the "right time" to do so.

However, deputy CM and senior NCP leader Chhagan Bhujbal struck a conciliatory note and advised Congressmen to do a serious introspection on the longevity of the Congress-NCP tie-up and ensure that "communal parties" like the BJP, Shiv Sena did not come to power in the state.

Tumultuous ties



Sonia Gandhi Sharad Pawar

CBI charges Ajit Jogi with forgery

New Delhi: In an embarrassing development for Chhattisgarh chief minister Ajit Jogi ahead of state assembly elections, the CBI on Tuesday filed a chargesheet against him for "dishonestly or fraudulently" using a forged document to tarnish the image of Intelligence Bureau and the Central government.



Ajit Jogi

A day after the Election Commission announced the poll schedule for Chhattisgarh, the investigating agency filed the chargesheet in the additional chief metropolitan magistrate's court at Karkardooma here alleging that Jogi had committed offence under Section 471 of IPC (using a forged document as genuine one). The chargesheet would come up before the designated court on Wednesday for taking cognizance and further orders.

As opposition parties like BJP and NCP bayed for his blood, Jogi ruled out his resignation saying the CBI action was politically motivated ahead of the elections.

The CBI had registered a case on April 2 this year on receipt of a complaint from the cabinet secretariat alleging forgery of a document under the code name "Black Sea", purportedly issued by the Intelligence Bureau relating to the acquisition of movable and immovable properties by the chief minister.

A CBI spokesman said Jogi on March 29 had met the special director of IB. On March 31, he sent a semi-official letter to Prime Minister Vajpayee enclosing a copy of a note alleged to have been initiated by the IB which contained signatures of the agency's special director.

Investigations revealed that the document produced, used and circulated by Jogi was a forged one and the allegations made by the accused against the Centre were false. PTI

Party puts Shinde in the line of fire

9/11
TIMES NEWS NETWORK 9/10

New Delhi: The blame-game in the Congress in Maharashtra in the wake of the Solapur by-election defeat, viewed from here after PCC chief Ranjit Deshmukh met party chief Sonia Gandhi, appears to have acquired a government versus party organisation turn, not to mention the inevitable Maratha vs non-Maratha twist.

Mr Deshmukh ridiculed suggestions being made in party circles that "Maratha consolidation"—both NCP leader Sharad Pawar and Mr Deshmukh are Marathas while chief minister Sushilkumar Shinde is not—had cost the party dear.

After his "very good" 30-minute meeting with Ms Gandhi, Mr Deshmukh sought to contra-

Solapur singe



Sonia Gandhi

S. Shinde

dict Mr Shinde's earlier complaint to the party chief that the Lok Sabha seat could have been won had Mr Pawar campaigned for the polls. The NCP's nominee, Mr Deshmukh pointed out, had lost his deposit when the party contested the seat on its own in 1991. "Therefore, this could be one of the factors, but not the

9-Prakash
only one," he told reporters.

He contended that the party organisation was in no way responsible for the Solapur debacle, but declined to comment on whether "surgery" was needed at the government level in view of the bypoll outcome. Mr Deshmukh said he had presented a "factual report" to Ms Gandhi about the bypoll outcome and that the state Congress could not be held responsible.

Was it then the responsibility of the government? He said it was for the AICC to decide.

He, however, refuted the view that the Solapur verdict could be repeated elsewhere in the state.

Meanwhile, the party high command has set up a high-level committee to inquire into the facts and circumstances leading to the Solapur defeat.

2-pronged Cong plan to expose corruption

Press Trust of India
New Delhi, September 2

IN A two-pronged strategy against the BJP-led coalition ahead of elections, the Congress will launch a major agitation programme in the country and party president Sonia Gandhi will tour extensively by road and rail to "expose the most corrupt" NDA government at the Centre. The agitation programme could even include "rail rokos" and "rasta rokos", but AICC general secretary Oscar Fernandes said the form of protest would be finalised over the next few days.

Fernandes has, in fact, already sent a circular detailing the agitation plan to party units in the states, including frontal organizations, to organise *dharnas*, demonstrations and picketing outside government offices as part of the *Jan Jagran Abhiyan*. While the circular also spoke of a one-hour "rail roko" on September 22 and "rasta roko" on September 30, he said on Tuesday that the exact programme of the agitation was yet to be decided.



Sonia Gandhi

Mobilising the masses

In the circular, Fernandes spoke of the need to expose the "most corrupt government" as also its "hollow promises" in view of the possibility that the Lok Sabha elections could also be held any time early next year after the Assembly polls in five states.

Highly placed party sources said Sonia's country-wide tour programme was being given finishing touches and would be her first

such major exercise to reach out to the people close on the heels of the Shimla conclave, which spoke of the coming together of the secular forces to defeat the BJP. The proactive Congress stance comes in the backdrop of the no-confidence motion against the Vajpayee government in the Lok Sabha recently, where the main Opposition party had expressed dissatisfaction over the BJP-led coalition's response on various issues, like national security and defence preparedness.

"We've drawn up issues of non-performance and corruption. These issues need to be taken to the people", Fernandes said in the circular. These programmes should not be "symbolic" but, "if need be, party workers could court arrest", he said.

Stating that the frontal organisations should be on the forefront of the agitation, Fernandes said party workers — throughout the agitation programme — should explain the issues involved and demand action against the guilty.

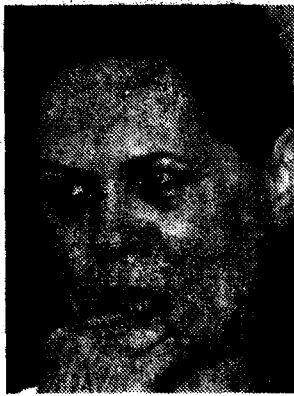
Sonia calls CWC meet on Uttar Pradesh

CL Mahoj in New Delhi

Aug. 27. - Wary of the political pitfalls with Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav ready to take over the reins in Uttar Pradesh, and faced with internal inputs favouring a tacit understanding with the BSP in the coming Assembly elections, Mrs Sonia Gandhi will convene a meeting of the CWC to firm up the party's electoral strategy, party sources said.

At the moment, an unenthusiastic Congress leadership is stuck with its public commitment to back Mr Yadav, but not many Congress leaders will shed sincere tears if Mr Yadav loses out in the race.

A large number of Congress leaders are actually wary of Mr Yadav forming a government. They feel once it happens, the Congress will be pushed behind the shadow of the Yadav-dominated SP, which is also a competitor for the Muslim and Thakur vote-bank. This, they feel, could effectively arrest Mrs Gandhi's "revive UP Congress" mission. Secondly, these leaders feel a Mulayam government could help the BJP



Mrs Sonia Gandhi

revive itself in Uttar Pradesh by playing Opposition politics. They feel the SP and BJP have always been "mutually catering agencies" through their extreme rhetoric against each other. Therefore, the AICC is extremely wary of the reports that the BJP "is not actually opposing" Mr Yadav's efforts to form the government, coming soon after the "pro-BJP" role he played during the no-trust motion debate.

These leaders feel unlike Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav, the SP supremo cannot be a trusted ally in Delhi given his "alleged ties with NDA leaders". Mr Yadav's open truck with Mr Kalyan Singh is also a matter of "secular discomfiture" for the Con-

gress. But the AICC is unable to publicly distance itself from Mr Yadav "now" for fear of being accused of jeopardising the "secular" opposition unity. It is also wary of how some of the party MLAs and some recent Thakur entries (anti-BSP) into the party would respond.

But the Congress chief ministers of Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Delhi and Rajasthan, where polls are due very soon, have conveyed to Mrs Gandhi that the BSP's Dalit base in these states could be a "valuable help" in fighting the BJP in the year-end elections. Many of them like Mr Ajit Jogi visited Delhi yesterday, favouring a "tacit" understanding with the BSP for the Assembly polls.

It may not be possible for the Congress to "formally" tie up with the BSP so soon for Ms Mayawati's spat with Mrs Gandhi and her daughter in Amethi, her role in hijacking the Congress MLAs and her till-recent ties with BJP. But many Congress leaders feel making overtures to the BSP could "gift" the party a "formidable alliance partner" at the national level in future.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 19, 2003

CONGRESS AND DISSENT

10-10

THERE COULD BE two explanations for the decision of the veteran Maharashtra Congressmen, Vasant Sathe and N.K.P. Salve, to form a new party, the Vidarbha Rajya Nirman Congress (VRNC). The first, and less flattering one, is that the decision was taken against the backdrop of next year's State Assembly election and timed to permit the newly formed party to make the most of its statehood-for-Vidarbha poll platform. The second, and more long-term explanation, is that the split in the Maharashtra Congress is a result of the party high command's persistent refusal to take a firm stand on the creation of a new Vidarbha State. There is truth in both these accounts. The short-term political ambitions of the Sathe-Salve combine do not wipe out the fact that they and other Congress Vidarbha leaders have run a long and frustrating campaign to persuade the Congress leadership to get moving on the statehood demand. These frustrations became even greater after the 1999 State Assembly elections, which put the Congress in power thanks to a post-poll arrangement with the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). Moreover, the creation of Uttaranchal, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh only served to firm up sentiments about statehood in the Vidarbha region.

This is the second revolt over the issue of statehood that the Congress high command has had to deal with in recent times. In Andhra Pradesh, four Congress MLAs from the Telengana region resigned from the party in protest against the high command's unwillingness to constitute a separate Pradesh Congress Committee for the region. The resignations were later denied, but significantly the MLAs belonged to the Congress Forum, a pressure group within the party that was formed three years ago to mobilise support for a separate Telengana State. With the Telugu Desam Party being opposed to bifurcating Andhra Pradesh, there is a section within the State

unit of the Congress that believes advocating statehood for Telengana will be an electorally rewarding poll strategy. Following the Vidarbha development, the Telengana Congressmen have come under fresh pressure and decided to give a sort of ultimatum to Sonia Gandhi on the statehood issue.

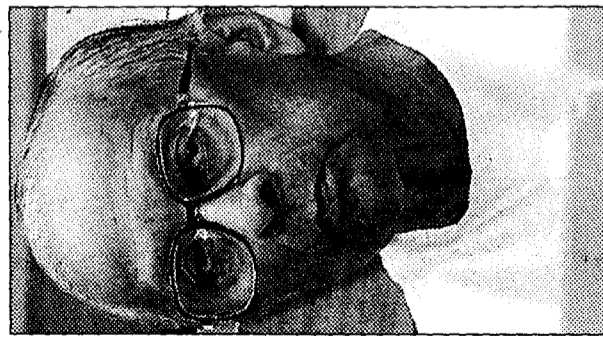
With the Telengana Rashtra Samiti calling for a coalition of regional groups engaged in campaigning for smaller States, it may not be possible to ignore this issue for much longer in the electoral context. The Congress has been traditionally resistant to the creation of smaller States but the recent developments in Vidarbha and Telengana may force it to take a more sympathetic view. A high-powered committee headed by the senior Congressman, Pranab Mukherjee, was constituted a few years ago to study the viability of smaller States, but one of the grouses of the Congress leaders from Vidarbha is that the Committee has been dragging its feet over the submission of its report. Not surprisingly, the Congress high command has attempted to downplay the happenings in Vidarbha and Telengana, portraying the former as one led by weak and ineffectual leaders. Two revolts of course do not add up to a full-fledged rebellion. However, the recent developments in Arunachal Pradesh (where Congress MLAs defected *en masse* to join hands with Gegong Apang), Chhattisgarh (where the Congress veteran, V.C. Shukla, quit to form a unit of the NCP) and Kerala (where endemic factionalism has reached a new stage) have been bad news for the party. This is particularly so since Assembly elections will be held in five States later this year and general elections are due in 2004. With the Bharatiya Janata Party showing no signs of political rejuvenation, the Congress seemed to have much going in its favour a few months ago. For the party, the recent developments are fairly serious cause for worry.

19 AUG 2003

WE FIND

Sonia comes between Basu & Biswas

CPM (2) EP (M) 5-8-1918



Basu



Biswas

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Calcutta, Aug. 18: CPM leader Jyoti Basu today said the politburo did discuss the party's support to Congress president Sonia Gandhi as prime ministerial candidate, apparently contesting state secretary Anil Biswas' denial of any such discussion in the apex body's meeting.

"We did discuss the party's support to Sonia in the politburo meeting and a further discussion will take place on this score next month. We consider Sonia an Indian citizen and there should not be any controversy if the party backs her after she is chosen as a prime ministerial candidate by the Congress," Basu told **The Telegraph** this afternoon.

Biswas had yesterday denied reports about such a discussion at the politburo meeting. "We

have not yet discussed anything about extending support to Sonia Gandhi," Basu might have spoken about the party's support to the Congress in line with the discussion that took place at the CPM's Hyderabad congress last year, Biswas said of the former chief minister's comments about supporting Sonia.

Basu iterated that the party's support to the Congress was a "political necessity" to ensure the defeat of communal forces in the forthcoming elections across the country. "I don't understand why there is a controversy about the party's clear-cut stand vis-à-vis the Congress. I am emphasising the party's line and nothing else," he observed.

Basu also resented the manner in which some Left Front constituents are crying themselves hoarse against providing support to the Congress president.

"We do differentiate between the communal BJP and the secular Congress party. Tell me, what will the Left do in the states where we are not formidable enough to counter the BJP?" he asked. "Do you allow a division in the secular votes to pave the way for the saffron party's electoral victory or work out a tactical arrangement to strengthen the anti-BJP forces?"

When told about the Forward Bloc's decision to maintain equidistance from the Congress and the BJP as "both are the parties of the bourgeois landlords", the veteran Marxist leader said he did not subscribe to the view.

"I am not bothered about what the Forward Bloc and RSP are saying about the Congress. We should not forget the political exigencies. We are committed to defeating the BJP at the national level," he said.

That Basu's observation about the Congress, particularly Sonia, has come as a major embarrassment for Left parties was evident from the manner in which Bloc general secretary Debabrata Biswas criticised Basu for his "overtures to Sonia Gandhi" during the day.

"The Left Front does not exist at the national level. We are not ready to toe Basu's line in extending support to the Congress president," the Bloc leader told a news conference.

Senior RSP leader Sunil Sen Gupta also felt that Basu's observation about Sonia would tarnish the Left's image at the national level. "Why should we extend support to the Congress whose credentials are also questionable?" he asked. He maintained that the Left should maintain equidistance from both the Congress and the BJP.

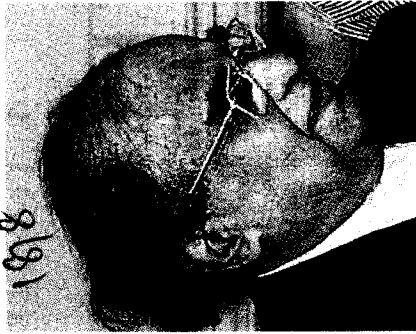
Sathe, Salve quit Cong. over Vidarbha

By Mahesh Vijapurkar

MUMBAI, AUG. 17. Two Congress veterans from Maharashtra, Vasant Sathe and N.K.P. Salve, today left the party to form a new party which would "fight to secure a new Vidarbha State". The announcement was made in Nagpur where a meeting of about 450 leaders was held at Mr. Salve's residence.

The party, to be called the Vidarbha Rajya Nirman Congress (VRNC), will be launched on September 2.

This comes close on the heels of the Congress seeking to control the ambitions of its party workers in Telangana for a separate State. Some leaders considered the Congress, the "parent party", but the mood at the venue was combative — let us get on with the statehood demand. During the next polls, the votaries would not mind aligning with parties with similar in-



N.K.P. Salve



Vasant Sathe

Maharashtra. The region has a deep, distinct consciousness and several assurances were given before it was merged with Maharashtra. The pre-condition of equitable development of the region, on a par with other regions, though assured, is still elusive. The grievance is that Vidarbha is overshadowed by western Maharashtra.

The first announcement came from Mr. Sathe, who is convalescing in Gurgaon, Haryana, where he announced the "parting of ways" with the Congress because of the "lack of response to a vital issue that most Congressmen believed would alone help the region to develop and prosper". He could not attend the meeting but emerged as a key person, along with Banwarilal Purohit, newspaper baron and former MP. The task of formalising a new party has been assigned to them.

No other go: Page 11

terests and even "expose those who oppose statehood".

The Vidarbha Congress would seek to attract "Congressmen" who would have otherwise been satisfied if the Congress high command had conceded the formation of a regional committee within the

framework of the AICC but independent of the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee.

The first States Reorganisation Commission reported way back in 1955 that a Vidarbha State was viable and recommended it without suggesting its merger into a uni-lingual

18 AUG 2003

13 AUG 2003

Cong. bracing for battle

119-1
1778

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, AUG. 16. The Congress held a strategy session today ahead of Monday's motion of no-confidence moved by its leader, Sonia Gandhi, against the Vajpayee Government in Parliament and identified the thrust areas to pillory it.

As the principal Opposition party, the Congress is clear that the use of the ultimate weapon in its armoury is aimed at exposing the all-round "failures" of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance Government.

The party emphasised that the exercise was not a "game of numbers" but intended to convey the people's anguish and anxiety over the manner in which the Government had been functioning.

"In a democracy, no-confidence is the last weapon before the Opposition parties to expose the Government and its failures," the party's chief spokesperson, S. Jaipal Reddy, said. Ms. Gandhi is likely to meet the leaders of like-minded Opposition parties on Monday to fine-

tune the strategy.

The party has not yet resolved the issue of boycott of the Defence Minister, George Fernandes. It was indicated that the issue could figure in the meeting of the Opposition parties and decided on the floor of the House.

The Opposition has been boycotting Mr. Fernandes for over 18 months and the Government plans to field him as a speaker from its ranks.

The Congress Chief Whip, Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi, later said that the Government had been a total failure and the Congress would point these out during the debate.

Issues related to internal security, financial mismanagement, plight of the farmers and farm sector, the foreign policy and defence preparedness would be focussed.

Asked whether the Congress would utilise the opportunity to launch its election campaign, Mr. Dasmunshi retorted that each and every word of the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee's Independence Day speech was election-oriented.

Parliamentary norms violated: Cong.

By Neena Vyas

NEW DELHI, AUG. 14. Opposition and ruling party members continue to trade charges on the political controversy related to the Public Accounts Committee report even as this has led to the tabling of the no-confidence motion against the Government by the Leader of the Opposition, Sonia Gandhi.

The Bharatiya Janata Party has charged the Opposition with not respecting the ruling of the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha and "observations of the Speaker of the Lok Sabha" (understood to have been made at a morning party leaders' meeting) against a debate in Parliament on this issue. The Congress has said that all parliamentary norms have been violated as the PAC is one of the important parliamentary committees through which the Government's spending is put under a microscope. The Opposition has also disputed the authenticity of the "so-called observations of the Speaker being circulated by the BJP" when nothing has been stated in the House.

There are glaring contradic-

tions in what the two sides are saying. While the BJP today started a letter campaign — it claims to have collected 10 letters from 10 PAC members to be sent to the Speaker disassociating themselves from the PAC report presented to Parliament on August 6 — some Opposition members alleged that the BJP was pressuring MPs to do this. It has also been said that it is against all parliamentary norms to be present and give consent to the contents of a report, and then "disassociate" with it.

Some PAC members said the committee had its last meeting on July 31 with Buta Singh in the chair. Nineteen of the 22 members were present and of these four wanted the finalisation of the report to be delayed, a request which was turned down by the chairman. Then began the process of reading the draft paragraph by paragraph and finalising it unanimously. At different points three of the four PAC members who wanted the finalisation delayed suggested some changes in the wording of some paragraphs. Apparently, the suggestions were accepted and carried out.

"After this if they disassociate

themselves with the report it amounts to total mockery of the entire committee system," said one MP from a party "friendly" to the BJP speaking on condition of anonymity.

Jaipal Reddy (Congress) said: "We condemn the pressure being brought upon NDA members of the PAC to write letters to the Speaker indicating their disassociation with the PAC report tabled in the House. It amounts to gross violation of all parliamentary norms, naked downright abuse of parliamentary process. At this rate parliamentary committees will not be able to function at all." Somnath Chatterjee (CPI-M) said the "real agenda of the Government was to cover up corruption and denigrate the parliamentary system."

Another twist to the continuing drama was given by the Parliamentary Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj. Although the BJP has been demanding for the last several days that records of PAC meetings leading up to the finalisation of the report be laid in the House to make all things clear — a demand which the Opposition has been making vociferously saying the papers

will prove who is right — today Ms. Swaraj disassociated the Government from the BJP demand.

She said that "the Government has not responded to the Opposition demand for tabling of records of PAC meetings ... I do not know what Mr. Malhotra has been saying on behalf of the BJP."

With the PAC issue now overshadowed by the no-confidence motion — during which the Opposition plans to raise several issues related to the Kargil War defence purchases — the morning meeting of party leaders called by the Speaker to discuss the PAC stalemate did not yield much.

It witnessed a spat between the chief whip of the Congress, Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi, and his BJP counterpart, V.K. Malhotra.

Mr. Dasmunshi virtually charged Mr. Malhotra with speaking daily on a subject on which he could have no authentic information since he was not a member of the PAC.

He challenged the BJP and the Government to lay all records of PAC meetings in the House and expose the truth.

15 AUG 2003

THE HINDU

P.P. 9. 100-

'Hey Ram, save the country from such bhaktas': Sonia

By K.V. Prasad

NEW DELHI, AUG. 9. The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, today launched a frontal attack on the Vajpayee Government over the denial of documents to the Public Accounts Committee of Parliament in connection with defence deals.

It was for the first time in parliamentary history that a Government had refused to provide information and documents on defence deals to an important committee, she said, and wondered what could one expect from a Government "which did not respect its martyrs and, instead, collected kickbacks on coffins for them."

Addressing a public rally on the occasion of the August Kranti Divas in East Delhi, Ms. Gandhi virtually launched her party's election campaign in the capital where Assembly elections are due this year-end.

Ms. Gandhi said that it was only when elections were around that the Bharatiya Janata Party raked up the Ayodhya issue under the impression that reality would be relegated to the background. "Perhaps these people want to pull the wool over the eyes of the Lord. I just want to say Hey Ram, save the country from such bhaktas who were destroying your values



The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, at a Congress rally in New Delhi on Saturday. — AP

(maryada)". Ms. Gandhi said that Government policies in the past four years had made the life of the common people difficult and "lowered the country's prestige". "Bragging about one's achievement" was not enough, people wanted to see for themselves the benefits of the government's programmes.

There was failure on all fronts, she said. A Government

"drowned in corruption and greed" could not realise the ground realities of life, she said. "A Government more focussed on sticking to power could hardly bother about the struggles of the people's daily life."

"How can you expect justice from a government which forces the CBI to save its Ministers," she asked.

The reference apparently was to the recent Opposition charge that the CBI had "dropped" the conspiracy charge against the Union Ministers, L.K. Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi and others in the Ayodhya demolition case. She accused the Government of "conspiring to topple" a duly-elected Congress Government in Arunachal Pradesh.

Earlier, Ms. Gandhi's political secretary, Ahmed Patel, referred to the BJP's 'Parivartan rally' scheduled for Sunday to be addressed by the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani. He said the only change the BJP leader was working on was to replace the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee.

The rally is aimed at creating an awareness among the youth of the sacrifices made by the freedom fighters and the role played by the slogan 'Do or Die', given on this day in 1942, in achieving Independence.

1 0 AUG 2003

THE HINDU

Jaipal junks Advani idea,

Pranab not averse

Cong differs on combined poll proposal

OUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Aug. 2: The Congress today spoke in different voices over deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani's proposal for synchronising Assembly and parliamentary elections.

In the capital, the party's chief spokesman virtually dismissed Advani's suggestion, saying the BJP leader was prone to indulging in "semi-academic speculation". The idea, S. Jaipal Reddy said, had neither been discussed by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee cabinet nor the National Democratic Alliance.

"Advani keeps floating these trial balloons without ever following them up with concrete action or proposition," Reddy said, adding that proof of a proposal lay in political will and not in "loud thinking".

"If Advani is so keen on synchronisation, his government should advance (the) Lok Sabha polls to November, when Assembly polls of five states are scheduled," Reddy told reporters. The Congress is prepared for it, he asserted.

Reddy's reaction came in response to Advani's statement earlier in the day that the government was holding informal consultations with allies and Election Commission members on synchronising central and state elections.

The deputy Prime Minister had said that five years in government "have made us intensely conscious" of the fact that the ruling party remaining in a continuous election mode was a "serious handicap" for good governance.

In Calcutta, Congress Working Committee member Pranab Mukherjee contradicted Reddy. He said a discussion was on at the political and apolitical level on whether a mechanism could be evolved on the basis of a political consensus to hold simultaneous Lok Sabha and Assembly polls.

"Every year, there is one election or the other. And in view of elections, the government always can't take hard decisions," Mukherjee told reporters.

"This would benefit the country's economy by way of saving the huge expenditure involved in conducting the elections," he added.

Mukherjee felt the government was within its constitutional right to hold early elections to the Lok Sabha, but could not compel a state government to hold simultaneous parliamentary and Assembly elections where the five-year term of existing Assemblies had not expired.

Reddy declined to comment on the views of his party colleague.



Jaipal: Out
of synch

Cong. keeps up efforts to save Mithi Ministry

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, JULY 29. Maintaining its offensive against the move to topple the Mukut Mithi Government in Arunachal Pradesh, the Congress today released its correspondence with the Centre warning about the activities of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isaac-Muivah) in the region.

Releasing copies of the letters, the party chief spokesperson, S. Jaipal Reddy, said the correspondence showed the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi's concern over the "destabilising effect" of the peace process the Centre was engaged in with the Naga group. The State Government had also forwarded a copy of the Assembly resolution which reflected its concerns in this regard.

The party, Mr. Reddy said, had sought an appointment with the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, for the day but it had not materialised.

Ms. Gandhi's letter to the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, on April 23, 2003 referred to his assurance with regard to the activities of the NSCN (I-M) and that the territorial integrity of the existing States would not be disturbed as part of any peace process.

She suggested that steps be taken to address the concern of States in the northeast. They included a more rigorous implementation of the ground rules for the ceasefire with the NSCN (I-M), especially in Nagaland, deployment of a dedicated force for the Assam-Bhutan border and sanctioning additional forces for specially protecting the national highways, particularly in Manipur.

In a letter to the Prime Minister on July 14, the Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister, Muku Mithi, drew Mr. Vajpayee's attention to the purported statement of the Minister of State for Home, Swami Chinmayananda, suggesting that there was no need for the State Government to carry anti-insurgency operations.

"The State Government is carrying out anti-insurgency operations under the specific written orders and advice of the Home Ministry. All operational decisions are taken in a coordinating group constituted by the Home Ministry and comprising all relevant Central agencies. No Central agency nor the Home Ministry has ever objected to any operational decision," he said, adding that if the Minister's statement was correct, why was he undermining his own Ministry. He also sought to know whether the recent denial of forces for operational purposes was for this reason.

Meanwhile, the party objected to Mr. Vajpayee's remarks at the conference of the Comptroller and Auditor-General. It said his suggestion to alter the existing auditing methods was "highly improper".

No Prime Minister in the last five decades had "tendered such advice" to a constitutional body such as the CAG, Mr. Reddy said.

While the framers of the Constitution had put an embargo that no one occupying the post be considered for any appointment, the BJP-led NDA Government had "subverted" the institution by appointing the former CAG chief, T.N. Chaturvedi.

30 JUL 2003

THE HINDU

Breakaway MLAs Join Gegong Apang, Stake Claim To Form Govt

Ruling Cong splits in Arunachal

Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 27 JULY 1987

ARUNACHAL Pradesh, the tiny state at the centre of the diplomatic row with China, looked poised for a regime change on Sunday following the split in the ruling Congress and the decision of members of the breakaway faction to align with veteran politician Gegong Apang, who is eyeing a return as chief minister.

Of the 59 Congress MLAs who revolted against chief minister Mukut Mithi, 29 have joined hands with Mr Apang to form United Democratic Front which,



MITHI: FACING THE MUSIC

claiming the allegiance of 38 MLAs, promptly staked claim to form an alternative government.

The development comes at a time when Arunachal Pradesh is already in the eye of a diplomatic storm, with China questioning its

status as a part of India.

The offensive statement, which threw a spanner into New Delhi's attempts to improve bilateral ties with its larger neighbour, was itself a response to protests against the illegal detention of Indian security personnel who were patrolling the LAC. The split in Congress — mirroring the familiar pattern of break-ups and regime turnovers amid allegations of foul play in the rest of the Northeast — is, in its own way, a rebuff to China for reopening what has been, for all practical purposes, the settled border in the sector.

Chief minister Mithi, who was in New Delhi to attend a confer-

ence on AIDS, had been anticipating the defection since the expulsion of one prominent MLA — L. Wanglet. According to reports from Arunachal Pradesh, the legislator had joined hands with Mr Apang, who had headed the state for 19 long years and was keen to return to the top job. The breakaway faction is calling itself Congress (D) former minister and MLA, Kameng Dolo said.

The Congress leadership reacted to the imminent loss of a state government by screaming foul. Its functionaries alleged that the rebellion against the chief minister had been encouraged by the Centre.

'NCP won't merge with Cong'

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Mumbai: The Nationalist Congress Party won't merge with the Congress, NCP MP and working committee member, A.H. Rizvi, said on Friday. "The NCP was formed by Sharad Pawar four years ago not only on the issue of Congress president Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin," said Mr Rizvi, the president of the Uttar Pradesh unit of the NCP. "The other important issue raised by him was the one pertaining to the lack of inner-party democracy in the Congress. As long as this issue is not resolved, there is no question of the NCP merging with the Congress."

However, he justified the NCP's decision not to raise the issue of Ms Gandhi's foreign origin. "The primary task before all secular and democratic forces right now is to defeat the machinations of the communal Sangh Parivar," Mr Rizvi said.

"Organisations of the Parivar, like the Vishwa Hindu



S. Pawar



S. Gandhi

Parishad, are trying to polarise the country on totally communal lines so that the Bharatiya Janata Party may reap political dividends during the coming elections. This is a dangerous game being played by the Parivar, which will strike at the very root of Indian democracy. Hence, we decided to drop the foreign-origin issue and join hands with the Congress to defeat communal organisations."

He added, "This was not the situation four years ago, when Mr Pawar formed the NCP. At that time, Ms Gandhi's foreign origin was very much an issue."

However, he wondered how Ms Gandhi would be able to

fulfil her ambition of becoming the prime minister. "In UP, which has 80 Lok Sabha seats, the Congress is organisationally in very bad shape," Mr Rizvi said.

"It is riven with factionalism. In the past, the Muslims and dalits provided a powerful political base for the Congress. But now many of the Muslims are with the Samajwadi Party, led by Mulayam Singh Yadav, and dalits are with the Bahujan Samaj Party, led by chief minister Mayawati. In fact, many Muslims and dalits are now veering towards the NCP, which has units in 55 of UP's 72 districts."

However, an alliance of the SP, Congress and NCP could give the BJP-BSP combine a tough fight, he said. The BJP's rank and file is unhappy with the party's support for the Mayawati ministry, he said.

Meanwhile, the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee is adopting a wait-and-watch attitude vis-a-vis the

NCP, whose spokesperson Vasant Chavan on Thursday cleared the way for an electoral alliance by publicly dropping the controversy about Ms Gandhi's foreign origins. Mr Pawar is currently abroad and is expected to hold formal talks with the Congress leadership in Delhi later this month. He already had an informal interaction with Ms Gandhi in Delhi a few weeks ago.

Quota question

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Congress's dangerous populism

The most important outcome of the Congress's three-day strategy camp in Shimla's salubrious surroundings is not the long apology for a manifesto obediently cheered by delegates. Nor is it Sonia Gandhi's arguably first attempt to project herself as the prime ministerial candidate. Or the clear signal to build alliances. The honour goes to the Congress's conclusion at the meeting that social progress needs another set of reservations — in the private sector and in the judiciary. The sheer irresponsibility of the move is shocking.

The Congress hopes to put the BJP on the defensive and take the game away from caste parties like the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party, at one stroke by extending quotas beyond government jobs and government-funded education. The others may be forced to follow-on or, horrors, go one better. The prospects for Indian society, Indian economy and Indian modernization are as clear as mud. First, the private sector will see an erosion of a fundamental right, to hire whom it sees fit. Amending the Constitution will raise the question of validity of the procedure adopted. Second, quotas almost tend to exclude the best.

Government has no problem with that. But why should the private sector suffer? Third, this will inevitably mean political interference in private sector hiring practices since politicians will seek to advance their candidates. Fourth, the selection of judges is problematic enough, without adding caste as another merit suppressor. In any case Lord Chief Justice Anand flatly contradicted President KR Narayanan when he went so far as to advertise his views on the subject and brought discredit upon his high office. The Congress should be ashamed to be reducing politics, even by Indian standards, to such a low.

Could this dangerous proposal be a sign of the Congress's realization that incumbency disadvantage notwithstanding, the NDA has an edge? Is that also why the Shimla meeting has all but buried economic reforms as a party agenda? Dr Manmohan Singh was at Shimla but was not part of the cabal that currently formulates Congress's economic positions. Populist social and economic policies have won party elections before but it does not mean it can do so again.

Congress strategists are claiming a 10 per cent increase in national vote share which will see the party through in the 2004 general elections. That does not mean that there is any basis for such a dramatic improvement; it is purely a mathematical calculation. An outline of a general election campaign is already visible. The Congress trashes reforms and promises all manner of goodies, the BJP either responds in full populist mode or combines populism with temple talk. Whoever wins, we'll have to hope they don't implement all their promises.

GRAND OLD PARTY OF INDIA DONS BATTLE GEAR TO WREST POWER

Sonia keen to stitch up a coalition for 2004 LS polls

Swaraj Thapa
SHIMLA 9 JULY

UNWRAPPING a masterplan for the 2004 Lok Sabha elections that puts premium on politics of coalition, Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Wednesday issued a public appeal to secular formations to come together in evolving a strategy to "combat communalism and religious fundamentalism and ensure the defeat of the BJP and its allies".

At the end of the three-day long deliberations here, Ms Gandhi also put her seal of approval to the six-page Shimla Sankalp, which, with its sharp pro-poor focus, clearly read like an election manifesto and demonstrated that the Congress plan of action rested on a combination of social engineering and populist promises, while attacking the BJP chiefly on security and non-governance. Announcing that it was ready to face national elections any time, the document asserted that a nationwide campaign Jan Jagran Abhiyan would be launched to "expose the BJP led NDA government's comprehensive and glaring failures on security defence, communal harmony, economic growth, social welfare, good governance, foreign policy and probity and transparency in public life".

Sonia Gandhi's appeal to secular parties, however, was a clear indication of party's limitations in taking on the BJP on its own. While reiterating the party line on coalitions formulated at its Bangalore plenary session, there seemed to be an

attitudinal change on the part of the Congress over being accommodative towards other non-BJP political formations. "Last month at Srinagar, I was asked about our stand on coalitions and I had said that we have an open mind. While reiterating all this, let me now add that the prevailing situation in the country makes it incumbent on all secular forces to intensify their efforts to evolve a strategy for combating communalism and religious fundamentalism," she said.

That the Congress had undergone a change of heart on the issue of alliances was further sought to be emphasised by projecting its partnership with the PDP in Jammu and Kashmir as an example of its flexibility on coalitions. Ms Gandhi had indicated in her inaugural speech on Monday that the decision to let the PDP lead the government had been a difficult one to take.

The preparedness to enter into pre/post poll alliances also underscored the party's acceptance of its unflattering status in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal and a grudging acknowledgement that revival plans for the party in these states was not a priority anymore at the moment.

Cong relives *garibi hatao*

Swaraj Thapa
SHIMLA 9 JULY

PUTTING reforms in the backseat for now, the Congress has adopted a pronounced "pro-poor" agenda. This has been done with an eye on the coming 2004 Lok Sabha elections.

The tactical shift was evident on Wednesday when the party unveiled its Shimla Sankalp — the political document that was framed after a three-day brainstorming session here — which identified a clutch of initiatives for the underprivileged like reliable power, food security, liberal loan regime, social insurance in unorganised sector and exploring scope of job reservations in private sector as its "core priorities."

The move not to have a separate panel to discuss economic matters also seemed to be deliberate, so that controversies on contentious aspects like disinvestment could be

avoided. Pro-reformists in the party were vehement in their rejection of this assessment.

They argued that the Congress had outlined the pro-poor focus in its agenda without jettisoning reforms or even setting it aside.

"There's no inconsistency when we say that we are with the poor," a party leader said. He pointed out that the Shimla document laid emphasis on the party's ability to "integrate pro-poor policies, programmes and perspectives with the concerns and aspirations of the middle classes and entrepreneurs."

He said the document reiterated its approval and endorsement of the liberalisation and reforms policy initiated by the Rao government in the early '90s.

The defence notwithstanding, the accent on populist measures was indicative enough to suggest that reforms will not be a priority for now. The party promises reliable power, cheaper credit, better seeds, assured irrigation and remunerative prices to farmers all over the country. Implementing this however, so far, has not been possible without offering continuing subsidy to the farm sector. Uninterrupted power, too, is more or less seen as an election promise.



On A Mission: Congress president Sonia Gandhi in Shimla on Wednesday. — AFP

Sonia invites secular parties to join hands

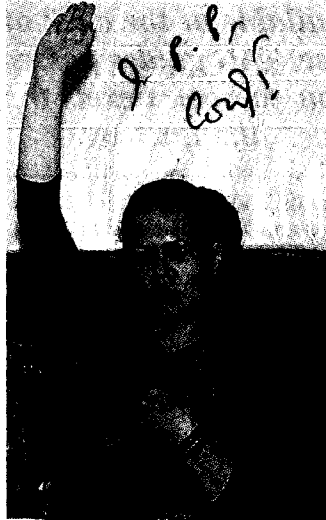
By Javed M. Ansari

SHIMLA, JULY 9. The Congress today appealed to all secular parties to join hands to ensure the defeat of the BJP and its allies, virtually laying the foundation for an alliance.

In her address at the end of the three-day Congress conclave here, the party president, Sonia Gandhi, said: "The prevailing situation in the country makes it incumbent on all secular parties to evolve a strategy for combating communalism and religious fundamentalism, and for ensuring the defeat of the BJP and its allies."

The six-page Shimla 'sankalp' (resolution), read out to the delegates by the AICC secretary, Selja, invited all "progressive thinking men and women, institutions, and political movements," who share the party's concerns and its vision to join hands in the ideological and electoral battle ahead.

The thrust of Ms. Gandhi's speech was an attempt to rally the party cadre for a prolonged ideological and electoral battle against the BJP and its allies. Conscious of the fact that the issue was agitating the minds of the partymen, she dwelt at length on the issues in an attempt to clear the ambiguities.



The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, raising her hand in favour of a 14-point political charter "against the forces of communalism and fundamentalism", on the last day of a three-day strategy session in Shimla on Wednesday. — AFP

The natural progression in the party's views on the issue was unmistakable. At Pachmarhi it hedged its bets, while at its plenary session it indicated its willingness to forge alliances. "The party will be prepared to enter into appropriate electoral or

coalition arrangements with secular parties," it had said in Bangalore.

In her concluding remarks, Ms. Gandhi sought to remove any ambiguities that may have existed on the issue. The party's appeal to secular parties was nuanced — the underlying message was that the proposed alliance would have to be a Congress-led alliance, and under the leadership of Ms. Gandhi. The message was implicit in the formulation on the issue in the Shimla resolution: "We now seek the support of the people to bring India back on the path of progress with the Congress under the leadership of Ms. Sonia Gandhi."

Turning to the Ayodhya issue, Ms. Gandhi made it clear that the party favoured a solution through the court.

"We are not against the facilitation of a negotiated settlement among the parties to the dispute, but the settlement must have complete legal sanction," she said. On Kashi and Mathura, she reiterated the Congress' commitment to the Protection of Places of Worship Act, 1992, which freezes the status of all places of worship other than Ayodhya as on August 15, 1947.

Opportunism, says BJP; Left says 'no': Page 11

THE HINDU

10 JUL 2003

Sonia flaunts her own progress report

KOTA NEELIMA
SHIMLA, JULY 7

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CONGRESS president Sonia Gandhi today staked her claim for the prime ministership by implying that she has the requisite political experience to push the party to power at the Centre, the way she did in 15 states.

Clearly seeking to counter the political seniority of Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee, Sonia, in her inaugural speech at the Shimla conclave today, talked of how she has turned the party around in the five years of her tenure — from six Chief Ministers in 1998 to 15 Chief Ministers today.

She chose to highlight her decision for a Congress-PDP coalition government in J-K as an example of her political acumen and maturity.

"The past five years have been a tremendous learning experience for me and I should say I am still learning," she added. Stressing that she has the support of the grassroot-level workers, Sonia said: "All along, it has been my desire to give respect and voice to the *karyakarta* (worker) across the country. I have been overwhelmed by the affection that has been showered upon me."

Interpreting her achievements as the "collective contribution" of party workers at all levels, she hinted at the backing she enjoys from leaders.

Seeking to clear the air on the charges made by senior party leaders that she remains surrounded by her coterie, Sonia said: "There is never any shortage of advice on any subject. I listen to all of them. I consult my colleagues. They are people of wide experience. We may not always agree



In Shimla, on Monday. Express photo

but I do seek a consensus. Ultimately, the decision is mine."

"By nature, I not only want to do the right thing but I also want to do a thing

right," she said, adding: "It was not easy, for example, to decide what to do when the government was being formed in J-K eight months ago. But I took inspiration from what Rajivji did in Punjab and Assam in 1985 and in Mizoram in 1986 and decided for a coalition in the larger interest of our country."

Sonia was clear on the issues to be discussed during the conclave, probably anticipating that the meet may turn into a stage for internecine war. Her apprehensions could stem from the dissent in Kerala, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, and the pre-election squabbling in poll-going states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi and Chhattisgarh. "I would encourage all of you to express your views frankly. But I must stress that we are here to deliberate on ideas, not to discuss individuals. This is a time for introspection and honest interaction, all of which should finally point to a political plan of action," she said.

Speaking later, chief party spokesperson Jaipal Reddy said Sonia would lead the party into elections. "The idea of questioning her leadership does not arise in the minds of partymen."

On why Sonia did not mention the Prime Minister in her inaugural speech when she made a scathing attack on the NDA Government, Reddy said: "We do not have to name Vajpayee. Like in the case of the Congress, the buck stops with the party president, in case of the NDA Government, the Prime Minister is responsible for all the issues."

Speaking earlier, senior party leader Salman Khurshid had said that when the Congress says the BJP's time is up, "it actually means that Vajpayee's time is up."

Discussion paper offers formula to woo minorities, women, tribals

KOTA NEELIMA
SHIMLA, JULY 7

THE Congress has decided it would need a 10 per cent positive swing in the votes in the next Lok Sabha elections to form government at the Centre on its own. The party hopes to achieve this by wooing the minorities, tribals and women.

In one of the most significant opinions at the Shimla conference, the discussion paper on election preparedness states that the economic reforms have not paid dividends to the party. "The middle-to-upper income bracket, who have been the biggest gainers under economic reforms, are the classes most distanced from the Congress," the paper states. "That is the reason why economic reforms have not paid the Congress the political dividend it deserves for having initiated them."

The paper has also analysed, seat-wise, how the party can improve on its present tally of 111 seats in the Lok Sabha. "In the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress lost 132 seats by under 50,000 votes, 77 of which were lost by

under 6 per cent of the votes polled. We should concentrate on these constituencies," it says. The party has identified two categories of seats, one of those in favour of Congress and those against Congress. "A large number of these seats fall in tribal areas. There is a wave of resentment in the tribal areas running south from Nepal to the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh," the paper notes, adding that new initiatives must be taken for development of tribals.

It also suggests that constituency-wise task forces, with state and central level leaders, should be formed to work on these vulnerable seats. Fifteen per cent minority vote is returning to the party fold and therefore, "a secular line, combined with a detailed programme of affirmative action in security, identity, education and job, would be the best way of garnering minority support."

Focus would also be on women. "With a woman president at the helm, showing sensitivity to women issues will increase the women's vote for the Congress."

Congress begins fine-tuning poll strategy

By Javed M. Ansari

SHIMLA, JULY 7. After drawing the ideological battle lines, the Congress today got down to fine-tuning its electoral strategy at its brainstorming session here. According to the agenda papers being circulated for discussion, the party has identified for special attention 132 Lok Sabha seats where it lost by less than 50,000 votes in the 1999 general election. In 77 of these seats, the Congress lost by a margin of less than 7 per cent.

In a significant change from the Pachmarhi Declaration of 1998, the party is now considering the proposition of entering into both pre and post-poll alliances with like-minded parties. Another proposal envisages the announcement of candidates for the Lok Sabha three months before the election and Vidhan Sabha candidates six months in advance in order to give them more time to concentrate on their constituencies. There is another proposal to announce the State election teams well in advance so they can work as an arrowhead and fine-tune the party machinery for the electoral battle. The party is also thinking of banning the entry of non-Congress men during the ticket distribution to avoid heartburn in the organisation. The party has asked for a constituency-wise



The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, at the Seva Dal flag ceremony in Shimla on Monday. — PTI

ment and involving the Youth Congress and the NSUI to attract the young and take the party's message to the youth. The aim is a concentrated offensive to attract the educated and upwardly mobile professionals among the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The document on political challenges has identified the BJP as the biggest challenge to the country and believes there is a need to fight it both intellectual and electoral level. The Congress believes that the BJP has changed the grammar and the metaphor of the public discourse and this need to be changed. The document says, "the centrepiece of our roadmap to re-occupy the centre stage of national politics must be the formulation of a comprehensive and effective strategy to counter the BJP."

Today's discussions were broken up into five sub-groups each covering different subjects. Each delegate was assigned a group based on his or her expertise. The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, Manmohan Singh and Pranab Mukherjee moved from group to group to coordinate the discussions.

The party is still discussing these proposals and a final decision will be put in a resolution to be announced on Wednesday.

measures being discussed is reservation in the private sector. On the Kerala and Karnataka models, the party seems in favour of extending reservation to minorities as a part of the overall reservation granted to the Other Backward Castes and the speedy adoption of the Women's Reservation Bill.

As part of the discussions of poll preparedness, the Congress is mulling over measures to reach out to the intelligentsia, beefing up its media depart-

ment force to visit these vulnerable constituencies and help chalk out the strategy.

The suggestions being made at the panel discussion call for a strong secular line combined with affirmative action for the minorities. One such proposal mooted in the discussion on social empowerment says that all the forest produce should be handed over to the tribals and the Forest Conservation Act should be amended and strictly enforced. Among the other

task force to visit these vulnerable constituencies and help chalk out the strategy.

On a nationwide basis, the working paper on poll preparedness feels that the Congress needs to capture at least an additional 10 per cent of the vote to form a Government on its own. It should concentrate on the tribals, the OBCs and the minorities and it believes there is a "wave of seething resentment" in tribal areas running south from Nepal to the Telan-

Sonia, PM meet, differ on Iraq

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Differences between the BJP-led government and the Congress over the deployment of Indian troops in Iraq persisted even after an hour-long meeting between Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Sunday.

Both sides agreed that there was need to consult various political parties and also hold discussions with the countries neighbouring Iraq, a suggestion made by the Congress. However, the two parties were still divided regarding the command the troops would function under. The Congress insisted that they be sent under the aegis of the United Nations only.

The government did not make any commitment on this demand and other issues. It merely said that the final decision would be taken in the "best national interest".

Mr Vajpayee reportedly told Ms Gandhi that the government had not taken any decision as yet about the

16/6
11/1
sending the troops to Iraq. The PM had invited the Congress president in response to her letter to him in which she had opposed troop deployment in Iraq.

External affairs minister Yash-



Sonia Gandhi meets the PM at his residence on Sunday to discuss the deployment of Indian troops in Iraq.

want Sinha, who briefed reporters after Sunday's meeting, did not say anything about sending troops under the UN umbrella. He merely said: "The decision will be taken in the best interest of the nation."

He also said that the government would arrive at a decision only after consulting "interested political parties, all ruling NDA members and countries in the region".

K. Natwar Singh, who too was present at the meeting, told reporters that the Congress had asked the government to consult all political parties and important countries neighbouring Iraq before taking any decision.

Besides Mr Singh, Ms Gandhi was accompanied by senior party leader Manmohan Singh at the meeting. The PM, on the other hand, was assisted by finance minister Jaswant Singh apart from Mr Sinha and national security adviser Brajesh Mishra.

Meanwhile, a team from the US will on Monday discuss with Indian officials the exact role the proposed peacekeeping force is slated to play in Iraq. The decision to send the team was taken by President George W. Bush during an unscheduled meeting with deputy PM L.K. Advani in Washington last week.

Panchmarhi to Srinagar

congr 519 1796

WILL the Congress seriously try to form a government at the Centre this time, given the developments at its chief ministers' conclave in Srinagar? The party has taken an ideological and political detour, albeit a practical one, to cover the distance between Panchmarhi, where it held its brainstorming session a few years ago, and Srinagar.

The Congress's three-day Panchmarhi session was obviously meant to establish Sonia Gandhi as the absolute leader of India's "Grand Old Party". But the conclave's confusing signals on coalition politics has given people reason to believe that without quality mass leadership and a deep understanding of ground realities, it was difficult to prove one's leadership potentials. Perhaps because of that very reason, Sonia Gandhi had at the Panchmarhi session dismissed coalition politics as a "passing phase" without delving into the causes that had made it almost an unavoidable political strategy. The Congress's "aim at returning to power on its own steam" in the

near future, as Sonia Gandhi had told the Panchmarhi session, was actually an unrealistic assessment of the prevailing political and socio-economic situation. She saw no difference in the present-day Congress and the party of yesteryear. What she had forgotten was that as an heir to the anti-colonial movement, the Congress had had the advantage of forming a common platform with a variety of interest groups. The Congress had fought for the end of colonial rule and post-1947 it worked towards greater self-sufficiency. In the years just after independence, the absence of electoral issues and other forces had helped sustain the umbrella politics of the Congress.

At Panchmarhi, the Congress — still under the delusion — refused to accept reality and thus failed to have a focus in its political agenda. The unicentric focus of Indian politics was evident till perhaps the Seventies, after which the spotlight was both on national and regional issues. The emergence of regional parties and power groups poses a challenge to national parties. The new middle class, a product of greater economic freedom, has usurped the role of urban upper castes and now dominates the new power groups. Hence, regional development is no longer a secondary issue. The power group, cutting across the caste barrier to a certain extent, now realises that its political potential and the scope for improving its economic status are the reasons why regional economic and social development has been prioritised in political parties' agenda.

For 50 years after 1947, the Congress

The Congress should realise that the days of single-party rule are over in India. The sooner Sonia Gandhi accepts this, the better it will be for the party, says SK SADAR NAYEEM



Sonia Gandhi addresses a meeting of Congress leaders in Srinagar on 30 May. The conclave gains importance because of the elections in four states — Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Delhi — and the 2004 Lok Sabha polls. — AFP

had been pre-occupied with national issues, paying little heed to change in society's priorities. Meanwhile regional forces were strengthening their bases — helped by the rank and file of established parties joining provincial groups, that ensured them a larger share in power politics. The prospect of more regional development grew with the emergence of more groups. With the spread of economic development and education even the "lower caste" Hindus became politically assertive — with the Mandal Commission's recommendations on reservation giving them social recognition.

The influential middle-class, enjoying economic prosperity and undergoing socio-cultural transformation thanks to liberalisation, too tended to join forces with the regional groups. No wonder, we see the emergence of leaders such as Mulayam Singh Yadav, Laloo Prasad Yadav, Kanshi Ram and Mayawati.

By rejecting the importance of coalition politics, Sonia Gandhi proved that the Congress had either not understood the phenomenon or was still uncomfortable with its mechanism. Also, after going it alone for almost a century, the Congress may have thought it below its dignity to accept political allies to run a government. Leaders in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar took advantage of Sonia Gandhi's stand by keeping Mulayam Yadav and Laloo Yadav out of any coalition. Such Congress leaders didn't represent either the new class or the splinter interest groups, and thus became redundant. In 1994, ND Tiwari, on the

pretext of rejuvenating the Congress in UP, opposed a tie-up with the Samajwadi Party and demanded the dismissal of the then Mulayam government. In 1995-96, Jitendra Prasad voiced his opposition to Mulayam Yadav. It was only Sharad Pawar, then a Congress leader, who at a Nagpur meeting said a Congress-SP tie-up would be in the interest of both the parties. Pawar wanted the Congress to help Mulayam Yadav form a government, and in return expected the SP leader to support the Congress when it withdrew support to the Deve Gowda government at the Centre. More or less, that framework existed till 1998.

There's no doubt that among the then Congress leaders, Pawar was the only one in touch with reality and steered the Congress to a grand victory in the Lok Sabha elections in Maharashtra by forging an alliance with SP and the Republican Party. After the Panchmarhi session, it became evident once again that the Congress was still not interested in taking a cue from Pawar. The Congress's rigidity helped the BJP consolidate its upper-caste vote bank, the BSP strengthen its hold over Dalits and the weaker sections and Laloo Yadav and Mulayam Yadav garner Muslims' support. The last blow to the Congress's single-party rule hope was dealt in Narendra Modi's Gujarat. After that only the party realised its "folly" and readily agreed to forge an electoral alliance with Mufti Mohammed Sayeed in Jammu and Kashmir. We all know what the result was.

With four states scheduled to go to the polls later this year and the next Lok Sabha

elections just over a year away, the Congress at its Srinagar conclave appeared ready to shed its Panchmarhi baggage. It's not averse to having a "working relationship" with other parties, it seems that the party has for the first time come to terms with the new developments both in principle and practice. But till now the Congress's coalition politics is far from clear. The elections to Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi and Chhattisgarh assemblies are crucial for the Congress because it's in power in all the four states. And the results will determine the leverage it can actually exercise vis-à-vis coalition partners. That makes it imperative for the Congress to seek the pre-poll alliance route, like the BJP, to political success. The BJP has tasted more success than the Congress in coalition politics — perhaps the party's new avatar (from Jan Sangh) in the coalition era of had a lot to do with that. It scored over the Congress by putting a reconstructed coalition in place even after the fall of its government in 1998. And if

the Atal Behari Vajpayee-led NDA government remains in power for another year, which is very likely, it will become the first coalition to complete its five-year term. If that happens, the credit should be Prime Minister Vajpayee's. For he made the BJP realise the change in the process of defining the political interest groups, prompting the party to accept the coalition mechanism. To achieve that goal, the BJP put even its pet issues on the backburner and declared that the "national agenda of governance" would be the basis of its poll pledge, adopted as NDA's manifesto to remove all irritants in ties with its allies. Here, Vajpayee played the most important role, for he made his allies accept the coalition as a long-term, instead of a short-term, political solution. Vajpayee was a minister in the country's first coalition government in 1977 and knows why its and later-day coalitions have failed. He knows that earlier coalition governments at the Centre had been based either on anti-Congress or anti-BJP sentiments, and not as a long-term political option.

But now if the Congress can come to terms with coalition politics and work sincerely towards new political equations, it can rejuvenate itself and put an end to the possibility of another third front. A Congress-led coalition is the only force that can challenge the BJP-led NDA. Such a choice, no doubt, is desirable in a large and strong democracy like India.

(The author is a commentator on current affairs.)

Congress tries to dilute Shankaracharya's praise

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 9 JUNE

STUNG by the pro-Hindutva testimonial lavished on former party president and prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao by the Kanchi Shankaracharya in the presence of Ms Sonia Gandhi on Sunday, the Congress, on Monday, struggled to make light of the embarrassment and put the controversy behind it. Notwithstanding the stir created by Ms Gandhi's move to share the dais with Kanchi Shankaracharya Jayendra Saraswati, the party was at pains to stress that nothing much should be read into his statements, particularly his praise for Mr Rao on the Ayodhya incident.

"It was a religious function where the Congress president happened to be present. The Prime Minister as well as other dignitaries were also present," party spokesperson Anand Sharma said. The spokesperson parried questions on the observa-



SONIA: CHECK YOUR STAND

tions made by the Shankaracharya, especially his compliments for Mr Rao for not coming in the way of the installation of the Ram Lalla idol at the disputed site in Ayodhya.

Clearly ill at ease over the implications of the statement, all that Mr Sharma could say was: "Sharing the dais does not mean

sharing a similarity of views."

Ms Gandhi's aides insist that the meeting was a strictly apolitical affair but the incident has now attracted charges that the party was still pursuing its soft Hindutva line. However, a senior leader considered to be close to the party president contended that the party would have come under an attack even if Ms Gandhi had shied away from the function.

"The invitation had come from the organising committee celebrating the 50th year of the ascension of the Shankaracharya. If Ms Gandhi had refused, it would have been projected into another controversy," he said.

When it was pointed out that the Shankaracharya's opinion usually conformed with that of the Sangh Parivar, party leaders maintained that its views had never been influenced or amended by participation in a religious function. "Our position on the Ayodhya issue is well known. We are for a solution coming from court," Mr Sharma said.

Jaggi murder: NCP leader's charge

By Our Staff Correspondent

NEW DELHI, JUNE 6. The controversy surrounding the killing of the Nationalist Congress Party's Chhattisgarh unit treasurer, Ram Avtar Jaggi, further deepened with the party leader, Vidya Charan Shukla, today alleging that police had "planned" the surrender of an industrialist, Yahya Debar in the case.

Addressing a press conference at Raipur today, a day after the police lodged an FIR against him for laying siege to the police station and "forcing" the SHO to register an FIR against the Chief Minister and his son, the NCP leader said that Mr. Debar, (elder brother of Ejaz Debar who is the NSUI president) was a businessman and his "surrender" would make the killing look like business rivalry. The brothers are said to be closely associated with the Congress and the Chief Minister, Ajit Jogi, and his son.

Talking to *The Hindu* from Raipur, Mr. Shukla said police had lodged a counter FIR against him for 'stealing the mobile phone of the Station House Officer'. Mr. Shukla said it was ridiculous to say that party workers laid siege to the police station and compelled the SHO to lodge another FIR against the Chief Minister and his son. "The police cannot cancel the complaint of Jaggi's son. Only the court is empowered to do so. The complaint has to go as a supplementary statement along with the first FIR whoever lodged it," he said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Jogi said that he was open to a CBI or judicial inquiry. At the same time, he expressed confidence in the functioning of the State police. "We are hopeful that the culprits would be nabbed soon and the truth would be out," he said.

Bandh observed

A bandh was observed the State condemning Jaggi's killing. Sponsored by the NCP and supported by the Bharatiya Janata Party, the bandh was successful. All major centres remained closed. The NCP and the BJP have been demanding a CBI enquiry into the incident and the resignation of the Chief Minister.

Meanwhile, the AICC general secretary, Ambika Soni, made it clear that there was no move to order a CBI probe. The central leadership of the party had been assured by Mr. Jogi that the real culprits would be arrested in a day or two, she said.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 4, 2003

FROM PACHMARHI TO SRINAGAR

BY REWORKING ITS approach to alliances at the national level, the Congress appears to have begun to come to terms with the need to agree on sharing power at the Centre with smaller parties before building a broad secular coalition against the BJP. At the Srinagar conclave of Congress Chief Ministers, the AICC president, Sonia Gandhi, expressed a readiness to align with like-minded parties both at the Centre and in the States to take on the multiparty National Democratic Alliance led by the BJP. Although the Congress is part of coalition governments in Kerala, Maharashtra, Bihar and Jammu and Kashmir, until now the 1998 Pachmarhi conclave of the party, which viewed coalition politics at the Centre as a transitory phase, was the reference point in all discussions of national-level pre-poll alliances. Without doubt, the new line would make the Congress a more attractive ally for parties such as the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal. In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the SP and the RJD have emerged as the principal opposition to the BJP-led alliance, and an overbearing attitude would have fetched the Congress no political dividends. The Left parties, too, would be more comfortable with a Congress that sends out accommodative signals. Although the Congress is still the main opposition to the Left parties in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, there is scope for coordination at the national level as both the CPI (M) and the CPI recognise the need for a secular alternative to the BJP. Even in Tamil Nadu, where the two major regional parties, DMK and AIADMK, have been included in the Union Council of Ministers by the BJP at different times, the Congress could use the carrot of coalition to reach advantageous electoral agreements. In effect, the "yes-to-alliances" line helps the Congress upgrade itself from the third or worse position in some States and directly mount a nationwide challenge to the BJP.

But even now, the Congress seems to see coalitions as a "necessary evil". The BJP, in con-

trast, made a virtue of its need to form coalitions by stating before the 1999 Lok Sabha election that it would form a coalition government even if it obtained a majority of its own. The BJP masked its need for alliances by speaking of giving expression to regional aspirations in its coalition. For too long, the Congress associated coalition governments with instability. However, over the years, its own experience has proved it wrong. The Congress was unable to form formal pre-poll alliances in Maharashtra, Bihar and Jammu and Kashmir, but in partnership with smaller parties — NCP, RJD and PDP — it is now able to provide a stable Government in these States. Kerala remains the only instance of a Congress-inclusive Government formed on the basis of a formal pre-poll alliance. But, by talking of the possibility of allying with the SP and the RJD, the Congress is reconciling itself to a non-Kerala model of alliance. Unlike in Kerala, where the Congress is the dominant partner, the party would have to settle for the junior partner status in both Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The post-poll experience in Maharashtra, Bihar and Jammu and Kashmir has apparently made the Congress realise the importance of being more accommodative in alliance formations before the election.

Lost in this change of line is the decision of Ms. Gandhi to let the Chief Ministers and the PCC presidents finalise the details of the alliances. Actually, this marks a welcome departure from the high command-centric affairs of the Congress. One of the reasons for the decline of the Congress is indeed the alienation of the decision-making high command from the ground realities of the States. It is but natural for the Congress, which is now beginning to understand the importance of the smaller, regional parties in providing an alternative to the BJP, to also concede the value of its own State units and regional chieftains. The years separating Pachmarhi 1998 from Srinagar 2003 do not seem to have been wasted at all.

THE STATESMAN

- 4 JUN 2003

Sonia backs Centre's peace move

By M. Saleem Pandit
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Baramulla: Reiterating her stand on supporting the Centre's peace initiative with Pakistan, Congress president Sonia Gandhi said on Sunday that her party believed bilateral problems could be resolved only through talks and not through the gun.

Addressing an impressive public rally organised by the Congress-People's Democratic Party combine here on Sunday, Ms Gandhi complimented the people of Jammu and Kashmir for defeating subversive forces by participating in the state assembly polls in large numbers. "It

was a victory for democracy in the country," she said.

Recalling how the people of the state had observed a three-day general strike against the killing of 24 Kashmiri Pandits in Nadimarg in Pulwama district in March, she said, "The people exhibited their secular bent of mind at that time."

Criticising the prevalent gun culture, the Congress chief lamented that the people of Kupwara and Baramulla had suffered the most due to terrorist violence during last 15 years. However, it was to their credit that they had faced it courageously.

Ms Gandhi stressed that the common minimum programme drawn at the time of formation of the coalition

government would be adhered to in order to usher in a new beginning in the state.

She said the chief ministers of the Congress-ruled states would reserve quotas in medical, engineering and other technical institutes for the affected people from the state.

She also distributed appointment orders to the next of kin of several militancy-hit victims in the district. The move was perhaps prompted by the widespread publicity given to a similar action by the PM at a public rally in Srinagar last month.

Earlier in the day, the police detected and defused a landmine just 500 metres away from the venue of Ms Gandhi's public rally.

Cong. keen on alliances: Sonia

By Javed M. Ansari

SRINAGAR, MAY 31. In an unambiguous enunciation of her party's stand, the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, today said that her party was more than willing to enter into alliances with like-minded parties, both at the Centre and in the States to defeat the BJP-led NDA Government. The details of the alliances would be left to the Chief Ministers and the party chiefs.

Speaking to presspersons at the conclusion of a two-day Congress Chief Ministers' conclave here, Ms. Gandhi answered a range of queries on coalitions and alliances, India-Pakistan relations, the Kashmir issue, the reservation issue and on when her children would join politics. She said her party was working closely with the Samajwadi Party and Ajit Singh and this could translate into an electoral alliance in Uttar Pradesh.

From grudging recognition to open acceptance, the Congress today appeared to have covered the distance regarding working with like-minded parties and the need to build a bulwark of secular parties to take on the NDA. Significantly, she indicated that in the States where the

party was weak such as Tamil Nadu, the Congress would be open to the idea of an alliance.

On Friday night, the party held an extended strategy session focussed on the States going to the polls. The broad strategy appears to be not to allow the BJP to polarise the polity and to focus on the development work undertaken by her party-ruled State Governments.

Today, Ms. Gandhi sounded bullish about her party's prospects. "We are in a very good position in these States and if the Governments and the State units can work together, we will

surely do well." The anti-incumbency factor would be successfully tackled.

The Rajasthan Chief Minister, Ashok Gehlot, came in for handsome praise at the conclave. Ms. Gandhi complimented his tough stand against forces trying to destabilise the social fabric and the drought-relief measures taken by his Government.

Denouncing the Sangh Parishad, Ms. Gandhi said the Congress would spare no effort in confronting these forces. She also took pains to deny that some of her party Governments were trying a "soft Hindutva" ap-

proach. "There is no such thing, it is a phrase coined by the BJP," she said.

The Congress president also lent support to Mr. Gehlot's proposal for reserving seats for the economically poor among the "upper castes".

On Kashmir, she reiterated her party's stand in favour of a dialogue with all shades of opinion.

Supporting the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee's initiative for resuming the peace process with Pakistan, she, however, regretted that the Government spoke in several voices on the issue.

Naidu's poser to Sonia

By Our Special Correspondent

CHENNAI, MAY 31. The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi's criticism of the Vajpayee Government's handling of the Kashmir crisis is "highly objectionable", according to the BJP president, M. Venkaiah Naidu.

"It is only criticism for the sake of criticism. This is not expected of the leader of a mature party which had been in power for over four decades in the country," Mr. Naidu told the media here today.

At Friday's conclave of the Congress Chief Ministers in Srinagar, Ms. Sonia Gandhi had said

that the Vajpayee Government lacked "clarity and consistency" in dealing with the Kashmir impasse. Rebutting the criticism, Mr. Naidu asked if Ms. Gandhi was saying that Pakistan was not at all responsible for the Kargil conflict and the failure of the Lahore and Agra peace initiatives and that the Vajpayee Government ought to be blamed.

Referring to her remarks that the door to peace with Pakistan should always be kept open, Mr. Naidu asked if India should not fight Pakistan even if it intruded into the country and did another Kargil. There was no rationale in Ms. Gandhi's argument.

THE HINDU

1 JUN 2003

Gehlot's quota gets Sonia blessings

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K. SUBRAHMANYA

Srinagar, May 31: After yesterday's pat for acting against VHP leader Praveen Togadia, Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot today picked up more accolades as Congress president Sonia Gandhi endorsed his government's decision to earmark 14 per cent reservation for the economically weaker among upper castes.

At a news conference to mark the conclusion of the fifth two-day conclave of Congress chief ministers, Sonia not only endorsed Gehlot's quota move but also reinforced his demand before the Centre for a constitutional amendment to enable his government to implement the upper caste quota.

The Congress chief disagreed with deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani's proposal to set up a commission to look into the issue of quotas for the economically backward classes (EBCs). There was no need for a commission, she said, adding that an amendment would be enough.

She did not think there was anything political in Gehlot's move. The Congress has been advocating upper caste quota for over 10 years, she said, referring to the then P.V. Narasimha Rao government's aborted decision to grant 10 per cent reservation to the EBCs. Even the Congress election manifesto for last year's Assembly poll in Uttar Pradesh had promised it, she added.

Sonia's endorsement of Gehlot's move came as a virtual dismissal of Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijay Singh's proposal yesterday for a diversity law to promote private sector employment for SCs, STs and other backward classes. Digvijay had seen no merit in focusing on PSU and government jobs as the



Sonia Gandhi at the news conference in Srinagar. (PTI)

availability of such jobs was shrinking.

It also meant that the party did not favour general secretary Vayalar Ravi's proposal, made at the conclave earlier today, favouring a reservation policy for the private sector. Making his presentation on employment and labour reforms, Ravi even proposed that the Congress chief minis-

ters could initiate necessary legislation in their respective states in this regard.

However, senior party leader Salman Khursheed told reporters that the conclave did not discuss the issue of reservation in the private sector.

"We only discussed reservation in PSUs and the government," he said.

Cong demands consistent Pak policy

■ 'New turn in Pak policy vindicates Congress stand'

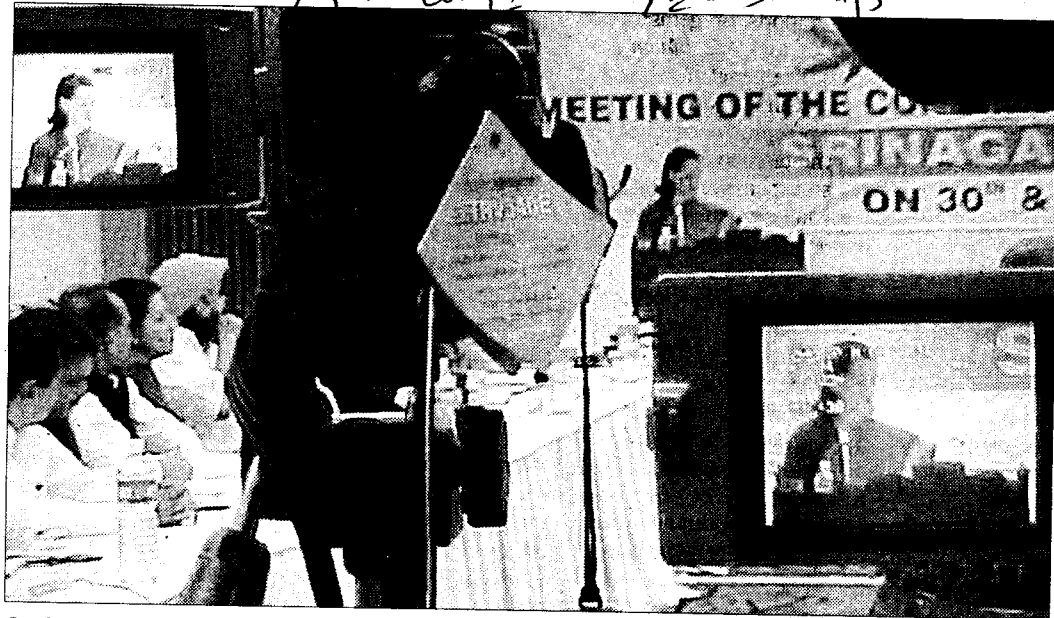
TARIQ MIR & KOTA NEELIMA
SRINAGAR, MAY 30

A MONTH after Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee extended "the hand of friendship" to Islamabad from the Valley, Congress president Sonia Gandhi slammed the BJP-led NDA Government for its Pakistan policy terming it as "lacking clarity, consistency and conviction."

At the fifth conclave of the Congress Chief Ministers here on the banks of the picturesque Dal Lake at the heavily guarded Sher-i-Kashmir International Convention Centre, Sonia said the Centre's stand on Pakistan "vacillated from one extreme to other."

While the broad focus of her speech was aimed at chalking out the electoral strategy for the forthcoming Assembly polls, the Congress president used the opportunity to hit out at Government's hot cold policy on Islamabad. However, she made it clear that her party would continue supporting the Centre on matters relating to national security and cross-border terrorism in J-K. "In spite of these glaring contradictions, we have extended our broad and sustained support to Centre on matters of national security, cross-border terrorism and India-Pakistan relations," she said.

Asserting that the Congress believed in keeping the doors of diplo-



Sonia Gandhi addresses party CMs at Srinagar on Friday. Express photo by Javeed Shah

macy and windows of dialogue with Pakistan open, Sonia termed recent overtures to Pakistan as vindication of her party's principled stand. "We were attacked bitterly for this position by the BJP during all recent Assembly election campaigns," she said.

Touching on the economic condition of the state, Sonia said: "I laid out our policy on J-K which was also highlighted in our manifesto and later formed part of the joint programme of action we drew up with the PDP. We are determined to be catalysts for this transformation," she added.

Admitting that unemployment is of special concern, she said youth of the state need jobs on a massive scale and her party is sensitive to the gravity of the problem. "Sometime back I had requested our CMs to explore how more seats in pro-

fessional educational institutions can be offered to youth of J-K and to children of migrants from the state. All our CMs have made generous offers and I wish to make particular mention of Punjab, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh," Sonia said.

Assuring the people about the implementation of the joint programme of action, Sonia said the common minimum programme serves as an article of faith for the state government and they are determined to ensure that it succeeds in fulfilling the mandate of the people. She added that despite differing with BJP ideologically, they would work in a spirit of constructive cooperation with the Centre.

Describing the conclave as having profound significance, Sonia said J-K represents the quintessence of Indian secularism. Refer-

ring to elections held in the state seven months back, she said people defied threats to give a resounding answer to the enemies of secular democracy. "Our presence here reciprocates in some small measure the faith they reposed in our democratic process and through it their desire to be equal participants in the national endeavour. Our presence here is a reflection of how deeply we feel for them for their pain and suffering," Sonia said.

Talking about the urgency of the dialogue, she said her party believes in the need to engage with all sections of society. "The dialogue address the legitimate grievances of all sympathetically. The substance and style of this dialogue should inspire confidence that process of reconciliation has begun in right earnest. Peace is indivisible. Together let us make it sustainable."

Congress to press for upper caste reservation

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
SRINAGAR, MAY 30

WITH an eye on the upper caste votebank, which has been eluding the Congress, the party plans to step up pressure for a Constitutional amendment for reservation for the poor among the upper castes without cutting into other quotas.

The issue was first raised by Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot when the State Cabinet approved a proposal on May 21 for 14 per cent reservation to the poor among the upper castes.

Saying he agreed with Gehlot on the concept, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh pointed out, "Reservation for the poor among the upper castes is not the issue. The issue is that no Government can enact a law on this without a Constitutional amendment. At the same time, political parties must decide whether it is desirable to have such a reservation policy."

"I feel that there is no harm if without encroaching on the quota of SC/STs and OBCs, there can be reservation for the poor among the upper castes," Singh, who is here to attend the Congress Chief Ministers' conclave, added. Singh said his government is drafting a proposal for reservation in the private sector.

31 MAY 2003

INDIAN EXPRESS

Assurance on reform, talks with Pak

Sonia sets policy agenda for poll

K. SUBRAHMANYA

Srinagar, May 30: Sonia Gandhi today unveiled her party's agenda for national governance, flagging off the campaign for the general election next year.

In her 25-minute opening speech at the fifth chief ministers' conclave here, the Congress president spelt out her views on foreign policy and economic reforms but avoided any direct reference to the poll.

On top of a nascent agenda for alternative governance was Sonia's foreign policy outline on ties with Pakistan, though she put it in the context of Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee's latest initiative to de-freeze relations.

"The doors of diplomacy and the windows of dialogue with Pakistan should always be kept open and active," she said. The Opposition leader also supported the renewal of political, economic, cultural, educational and sporting ties with the western neighbour.

Sonia advocated further economic reforms to make the national economy "domestically productive and globally competitive". She perhaps found it necessary to give the assurance to domestic industry, the markets and foreign investors in the light of her party's increasing criticism of the Vajpayee government's reform agenda.

At the same time, Sonia emphasised that the Congress was



Sonia

committed to the welfare of the poor and the downtrodden who, according to critics, have been the losers in the reform era.

She spelt out the Congress' plans to strengthen agriculture, revitalise economic growth, promote investment, create employment, enforce fiscal management and draw up an effective food-for-work programme to provide security to the poor. The NDA's policies have failed on all these fronts, Sonia asserted.

With as many as 15 states under Congress rule, Sonia asked her chief ministers to shield the party from any potential anti-incumbency worries in their states. Each chief minister needs to "identify a few flagship successes he wants to highlight and project as a unique contribution, from a political point of view", she said.

Determined not to leave any potentially positive reform

plank to the BJP, she advised the chief ministers to explore possibilities of legislation at the state level to downsize ministries.

The Congress president took credit for getting a "categorical assurance" from deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani that "the territorial integrity of the existing states in the Northeast will not be disturbed as part of any peace process". She urged the Centre to take all necessary steps to improve law and order in the region.

Sonia iterated her party's commitment to work for the return of normality in Jammu and Kashmir, where she is holding this conclave. She asked the chief ministers to reserve seats in educational institutions for youth from the state and to help promote tourism, which was the main source of income in the past.

The Congress president was scheduled to sit down with the chief ministers and other party colleagues for a post-dinner session to plan the strategy for the Assembly elections in five states — Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Mizoram — in November.

She patted Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot for clamping down on the VHP's hate campaign in the state. In what is seen as a mild censure of Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijay Singh's recent advocacy of soft Hindutva, she said: "Let us not look to what is electorally expedient."

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 CONG. AFFAIRS / 'I HAVE NOTHING AGAINST SONIA GANDHI'

Groupism has taken precedence: Arjun Singh

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, MAY 22. The senior Congress leader, Arjun Singh, today vehemently protested his loyalty to the party president, Sonia Gandhi, and denied the insinuation that he had cast aspersions on her leadership. "For me to even think of alleging anything about her is unimaginable," Mr. Singh told the media in a damage limitation exercise.

Mr. Singh, however, hinted that he was not happy with the growing groupism in the party. Groupism "has now taken precedence over party interest," he said. Many Congress leaders trace his unhappiness to the rise of Ambika Soni and his consequent "marginalisation" in the power equation.

The leadership, however, appeared to put a cap on the controversy arising out of

Mr. Singh's emotional remarks on Wednesday on the challenges and problems facing the party, while participating in a commemorative meeting on Rajiv Gandhi. In fact, Mr. Singh will be flying out on Friday morning to join Ms. Gandhi and Ms. Soni on their visit to Madhya Pradesh. Talking to newsmen at a specially convened press conference, Mr. Singh made a conscious effort to clarify the remarks pertaining to Ms. Gandhi. He made the point that it would be wrong to compare Ms. Sonia Gandhi to her mother-in-law, Indira Gandhi, as the circumstances in which they took charge of the party were different.

"Everyday, people were leaving the party and we had only four State Governments, today that number has risen to fifteen," he said.

Though Mr. Singh clarified that he had not used the word "coterie" during his speech at the commemorative function, he did reiterate the point he had made about groupism.

"This has always existed in the party, but that it should not go to the extent that it hurts the party's interests, today some of us are breaching that dividing line." But he quickly clarified that he was not blaming any individual.

Explaining the rationale for his remarks, Mr. Singh said there was a logical focus.

"It was made in the context of Rajivji's famous speech at the Mumbai centenary and it was meant to strengthen the party."

The import of his speech was to emphasise the need to work unitedly and to strengthen the party.

Ajit meets Sonia, to forge strong Opposition

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 28 MAY

DESPERATE to get even with the BJP-BSP alliance in Uttar Pradesh and, for this purpose, forge a broad Opposition alliance, and also to keep his flock of MLAs away from the prying eyes of the leaders of the BSP-BJP alliance, Rashtriya Lok Dal chief and former Union minister Ajit Singh, on Wednesday, met Congress president Sonia Gandhi.

On a day of fast-moving developments, the western Uttar Pradesh leader met Ms Gandhi at her residence on Wednesday evening, and remained closeted with her for about half-an-hour. The meeting, sources in the RLD pointed out, was part of Mr Singh's ongoing efforts to bring the Opposition parties together in UP with the aim of seeking the ouster of the Mayawati regime. Officially, RLD sources maintained that Mr Singh had met Ms Gandhi to invite her for his father, the late Charan Singh's death anniversary function.

The meeting was preceded by the resignation of the five RLD ministers from the Mayawati



SINGH: UNITED WE STAND

government. The development is a precursor to the formal withdrawal of support to the coalition government in UP.

Despite the fact that Ms Mayawati, who has of late emerged as the principal tormentor of Opposition parties, having succeeded in splitting the Congress and the Apna Dal and weaning away a sizeable section of independent legislators, is away on a foreign tour, speculation was rife that as many as seven of the 14 MLAs belonging to the RLD were in touch with the BJP's legislature party leader and state urban development minister, Lalji Tandon.

Undeterred by these reports, Mr Singh took the initiative of meeting Ms Gandhi in his search for a broad Opposition unity to take on the might of the BSP-BJP alliance in the state. Immediately after resigning from the Union Cabinet, the Jat leader got in touch with the Samajwadi Party duo of Mulayam Singh Yadav-Amar Singh and the Rashtriya Kranti Party chief and former UP chief minister Kalyan Singh to seek their support in fighting the BSP-BJP combine.

Unfortunately for him, the demise of Mr Yadav's wife soon after has kept the Samajwadi Party supremo away from any form of political activity. He's now likely to arrive in the capital only on Friday. Till then, all attempts to bring the Opposition parties together will have to be put on hold.

Keen to avenge his humiliation at the hands of the central BJP leadership, it's clear that Mr Singh will, in the days to come, go all out to attain his end. He doesn't have much time, as any delay on this count is likely to put his team of MLAs that much more vulnerable to attacks from the BSP-BJP combine.

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FORGIVE BUT DON'T FORGET

THE DECISION OF the Congress high command to drop disciplinary action against the rebels in Kerala led by the former Chief Minister, K. Karunakaran, seems to be the result of a pragmatic approach to the faction-ridden affairs of the party in the State. After having secured the victory of the official candidate in the recent Rajya Sabha election, the high command could have acted tough against the 20-odd MLAs still owing allegiance to Mr. Karunakaran. But the AICC president, Sonia Gandhi, appears to have factored in the long-term interests of the party in choosing to let off the MLAs with a warning. Although there would have been no immediate danger to the Antony Government even if all the rebel MLAs deserted the party, the Congress leadership wanted to use the opportunity of acting from a position of strength to make a call for unity. Any attempt to punish the dissident MLAs, who had defied the high command and voted for the rebel candidate in the Rajya Sabha poll, would only have precipitated the crisis in the Kerala unit of the party. With the dissidence now kept down to controllable levels, there was nothing to be gained from forcing the hand of Mr. Karunakaran. However, credit is also due to the Kerala Chief Minister, A. K. Antony, who pleaded for leniency in dealing with the supporters of Mr. Karunakaran, his arch-rival in the party. Obviously, he too saw no point in paving the way for a split. Especially since the prime objective of holding out against the factional pressures from Mr. Karunakaran had already been achieved.

Also, by divesting Ambika Soni of her charge of Kerala in the organisational reshuffle, the high command sent a message of reconciliation to the Karunakaran loyalists. Ms. Soni did not endear herself to the dissident group by her handling of the crisis prior to the Rajya Sabha poll. Although the tough attitude adopted by her was partly necessitated by the crisis period,

in the present phase, when the emphasis is on reconciliation, Ms. Soni would have been a liability in Kerala. With Ahmad Patel being given charge of the State, the dissidents have the chance to make a fresh beginning and rebuild bridges with the AICC. The high command also spared the KPCC president, K. Muralidharan, the son of Mr. Karunakaran. Although Mr. Muralidharan did not openly flout the high command's directives, there were indications that he was torn between loyalty to his father and the need to maintain unity in the ranks. Not surprisingly, Mr. Muralidharan was asked to rise above factional pressures "no matter how strong they may be". The high command was adopting a definite strategy in dealing with the dissidents. It will do what it must to quell open defiance of the leadership. Nothing less, but also, more importantly, nothing more than what it must.

Obviously, at the end of the crisis, the rebels have a lot to reflect upon. Many of them owe their political career to Mr. Karunakaran, and there is a binding factional loyalty. But, going by the current round of brinkmanship played out by Mr. Karunakaran, there is a case for the faction exerting pressure from within. The rebel leader would serve not only the party's, but also his faction's cause better by curbing the sense for misadventure fuelled by petty personal rivalries. As for the party high command, which handled the crisis with both firmness and understanding, this is no time for complacency. Having done the right thing by forgiving the dissidents, it should not forget that the factional differences in the State unit have only been papered over. If serious efforts are not made to address the issue of factionalism, keeping in mind the past experience, it would only be a matter of time before Mr. Karunakaran comes up with another grievance. And next time, the options would be fewer.

Cong polls on May 8

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, April 25

AMID SPECULATION of an imminent AICC shake-up, Congress president Sonia Gandhi has decided to hold the CPP executive elections on May 8.


Filing nominations for the posts of one treasurer, three secretaries and an 18-member executive — 12 from the Lok Sabha and six from the Rajya Sabha — will get over on May 2. Senior leader R.N. Mirdha will be the returning officer for the polls, which will elect members for a two-year term.

But while revamping her AICC team, Sonia may recruit some additional hands and "rationalise" the distribution of portfolios, keeping in view the next round of assembly and Lok Sabha elections.

General secretary Ambi-

LIKELY CHANGES

- Instead of a drastic CPP overhaul, Sonia may recruit an additional gen secretary and 'rationalise' portfolio distribution
- She is likely to give a new impetus to UP, where there's a demand to involve Rahul and Priyanka in active politics
- There's Bihar, where the state unit wants to snap ties with RJD & Gujarat, where the Hindutva forces battered it
- The reshuffle is expected to set the stage for a change in the PCCs too. Jharkhand has an acting state unit president. In Chhattisgarh, the party is likely to go for a change to take on a possible threat from VC Shukla.



ka Soni, for instance, holds charge of trouble torn Kerala and Congress-ruled Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan where elections are due this year, as well as of the Media depart-

ment. Vayalar Ravi looks after Andhra, Karnataka and Maharashtra where assembly and Lok Sabha polls will coincide. Sonia is also likely to give a new impetus to the party's functioning in

UP and Gujarat.

Meanwhile, Congress spokesperson Jaipal Reddy accused the NDA government of entertaining financial bids on the disinvestment of HPCL and BPCL before taking Parliament into confidence and demanded a discussion under a censure motion to exploit the differences within the NDA on the issue.

He said only the 183 BJP members backed disinvestment, while 304 MPs, including from BJP's allies, like the Shiv Sena, Trinamool Congress, the TDP and the DMK, were against it.

Another 58 members have yet to spell out their stand.

The Congress, however, remained non-committal on the proposed amendment to the anti-defection Bill and the Constitution Amendment Bill to limit the size of the ministries.

Sonia lends Kerala unit a ear

Statesman News Service

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, April 20. — Efforts are underway to rescue Kerala Congress from arguably its worst-ever crisis with KPCC President Mr Muralidharan reaching the capital to meet Mrs Sonia Gandhi. He will be joined tomorrow by his father Mr K Karunakaran.

The meeting was fixed after the Congress president had a discussion with Mr Karunakaran on Saturday over the phone. Mrs Gandhi has reportedly been advised by Kerala chief minister Mr AK Antony to put things in perspective and not to precipitate a crisis which may threaten his government.

The massive buildup which reached its

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climax with Mr Karunakaran's rebel candidate polling 26 votes in Rajya Sabha elections was allowed to subside, despite persistent demands for action against both Mr Karunakaran and Mr Muralidharan. If there is any disciplinary move against 'the rebels' led by Mr Karunakaran, it would incorporate Mr Muralidharan as well, notwithstanding his 'neutral' image.

The two AICC general secretaries from Kerala, Mr Vayalar Ravi and Mr Ramesh Chennithala, are pressing for action. They have the support of Mrs Ambika Soni who is in charge of Kerala. But AICC observers Mr RK Dhawan and Mr Azad, who came to Kerala, prefer a moderate approach. Mr Karunakaran, however, appears ready for the next round of battle.

2 1 APR 2003

THE STATESMAN

Sonia assails Centre's stand on Iraq crisis

HO " 9.8 P. cont. 19/4

JABALPUR, APRIL 13. The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, today attributed the reluctance of the NDA Government in condemning the United States action against Iraq to its "past prejudices".

"The NDA Government is suffering due to its past prejudices and that is the sole reason behind not taking any strong stand against the U.S. President, George W. Bush," she told presspersons in an informal chat on arrival at the Dumna airport here from the Kanha-Kisli National Park.

The Congress, she said, had bright prospects in the coming Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. Ms. Gandhi was given a rousing reception by party workers here. Later, she left for New Delhi along with the party general secretaries, Kamal Nath and Ambika Soni.

The Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister, Digvijay Singh, said the large turnout at Ms. Gandhi's meetings at Bukshwaha, Beohari and Mandla on Saturday indicated that the Congress would come out with flying colours in the polls. On the issue of the senior Congress leader, V.C. Shukla, joining the Nationalist Congress Party, Mr. Singh said, "He (Mr. Shukla) has the habit of changing parties and it will not affect the Congress in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh".

Meets Uma Bharti's brother

Mr. Singh said the suspended BJP legislator,



The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, escorted by Seva Dal workers before addressing a news conference in Jabalpur on Sunday. — PTI

Swami Prasad Lodhi, brother of the former Union Minister, Uma Bharti, met Ms. Gandhi on Saturday at Bakswaha.

He, however, refused to divulge details of the deliberations. Also, he did not comment on the possibility of Mr. Lodhi joining the Congress.

"Discussions are in progress regarding the selection of

candidates for the coming Assembly election," he said.

Visits villages

Earlier, Ms. Gandhi visited four villages in Mandla district to see the development works being carried out there.

She visited Aroli, Kutwahi, Sargaon and Borachhapri villages by road and spent about three hours among the

tribals, official sources said in Bhopal.

She enquired about the various schemes being implemented for the development of the villages, particularly about the schools, the sources added.

She was accompanied by Mr. Singh and the State Congress chief, Radhakishan Malviya. — PTI, UNI

Deliberations continue on Kerala Cong. crisis ¹¹⁰⁻¹¹ 18/4

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI APRIL 17. The Congress leadership today continued to deliberate on the course of action to be adopted in the wake of the developments in its Kerala unit.

The AICC general secretary in charge of the State, Ambika Soni, and the two observers, Gulam Nabi Azad and R. K. Dhawan, have made some recommendations to the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi.

The Congress president had asked the two observers and Ms. Soni to study the report sent by the KPCC chief, K. Muralidharan, besides inputs received from other sources, and suggest the course of action to be adopted. At the end of their consultations, the leaders said their recommendations were made "keeping in mind the discipline and unity of the party".

Mr. Muralidharan sent a detailed three-page report last night in which he has sought to absolve himself of any responsibility for the developments. He has reportedly argued that he did all that was asked for by the high command and ensured the victory of the official candidates. He is also reported to have pointed out that not only did he expel the rebel candidate, he had also directed the MIAs to vote for the official candidates. The central leadership, however, does appear to be unhappy with him.

However, the leadership is treading cautiously, considering the overall impact that its actions may have on the party and the Government in Kerala. Emerging from their meeting this evening, Ms. Soni, Mr. Dhawan and Mr. Azad emphasised the fact that "it is a political issue that has to be handled tactfully, keeping both the long term and short term interests of the party in

mind". The three leaders are expected to meet the Congress president on Friday morning. "It is now up to the Congress president to decide; she may accept our recommendation or amend it," Ms. Soni said, refusing to reveal the course of action they have suggested.

The Congress leadership has to address the twin issues of indiscipline and safeguarding the State Government from any adverse impact. It wants to act in a manner that shows that it does not condone indiscipline, without precipitating matters. The bottom line, according to Ms. Soni, would be to strengthen the party.

CPI(M) to keep off issue

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, APRIL 17. The CPI(M) has decided to adopt a passive posture with regard to the political crisis being faced by the A.K. Antony-led United Democratic Front (UDF) Government in Kerala.

With the official Congress camp having survived the rebellion during the recent Rajya Sabha elections, the CPI(M) now prefers to keep a distance.

Briefing correspondents after a two-day politburo meeting here, the CPI(M) general secretary, Harkishan Singh Surjeet, said the party's objective was not to bring down the Antony Government, which was best left to the party concerned.

The Rajya Sabha poll results came around the time when the politburo was in session. Had the senior Congress leader, Karunakaran's candidate pulled it off, the CPI(M) would have had to swing into action.

18 APR 2003

THE HINDU

Serious problem in Kerala: Cong.

By Our Special Correspondent
NEW DELHI, APRIL 16. The Congress has admitted that there is a problem in the Kerala unit of the party and asked the KPCC chief, K. Muthidharan, for a report on the situation and the recent Rajya Sabha elections. "No doubt we have a serious problem," the party spokesperson, Jaipal Reddy, said here today.

Meanwhile, the party's two central observers also submitted their written reports to the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, this afternoon. Gulam Nabi Azad and R. K. Dhawan met the Ms. Gandhi at the AICC headquarters and are reported to have given her a detailed account of the developments and their assessment of the situation.

Mr. Reddy said the party was studying the situation in the State unit and "a com-

prehensive view would be taken of the situation".

The party's central leadership does not want to get drawn into a verbal duel with the senior Kerala leader, K. Karunakaran, and that is why it refused to react to the allegations made by him.

The leadership is moving extremely cautiously on the question of disciplinary action against the 26 MLAs who have voted against the two official candidates in the just-concluded Rajya Sabha elections.

The head of the disciplinary action committee, L.P. Sahi, indicated that he was yet to receive any report against the MLAs.

Senior leaders feel that the party needs to move with caution and that nothing must be done to exacerbate the situation further. "Already, enough damage has been done to the party by this unfortunate episode.

The issue has to be handled with tact,"

said a senior CWC leader.

These leaders believe that the Congress leadership has already proved a point and stamped its authority by calling Mr. Karunakaran's "bluff" and ensuring the victory of the official candidates.

They believe that any precipitate action may force the old warhorse into asking his 26 MLAs to form a separate group in the party, which, in turn, could destabilise the Congress-led United Democratic Front Government in the State.

There is considerable concern in the party over the Kerala developments and the impact it could have on the party's long-term prospects, particularly in the Lok Sabha polls. At the best of times, a united UDF has always had to contend with the LDF. "Unless the rift is healed, it will be tough for us during the Lok Sabha polls," said an AICC leader.

17 APR 2003

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APR 16 1983

Govindacharya quits BJP

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, APRIL 19. The BJP general secretary, K.N. Govindacharya, today announced his decision to quit the party altogether — he will not renew his membership which is coming to an end — but he will continue to function as a 'swayamsewak' of the RSS.

Talking to reporters here today, Mr. Govindacharya denied that he had made any commitments to a news agency on Friday that in his view the BJP had little chance to oust Digvijay Singh from Madhya Pradesh and Sheila Dikshit from Delhi. In a statement today, he described the report as a deliberate mischief.

Earlier in the day, in Jabalpur, the party president, Venkaiah Naidu, dismissed his reported comments as of no consequence since he "was no longer a political figure."

It was quite clear that the party had adopted a 'could-not-

care-less attitude' about Mr. Govindacharya's comments and his work and his decision not to renew the membership of the party seemed to stem from this. A mutual antipathy seemed to have set in.

The man who was once considered the ideologue of the party said he wanted to work outside "power politics", on a wider canvas that would give him the freedom to look at larger issues of hunger, unemployment, lack of development, hegemony of the West through the World Trade Organisation, and a host of other issues.

He would, however, keep his commitment of submitting his report on the study of the country's economic situation to the BJP president as soon as it was completed.

He would participate in organisational and constructive actions through the Swadeshi Jagran Manch and other organisations, some of them Gandhian.

17 APR 2003

THE HINDU

Kerala casts cloud on Sonia team revamp

Clash 1999
 stokes
 caste
 embers

VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN

Thiruvananthapuram, April 15: A day after the Rajya Sabha election that exposed the deep divisions within the ruling Congress in Kerala, the debate within the party has started acquiring a distinct caste and communal undertone.

The proponents of the debate seek to paint the poll-related developments in the party as a clear manifestation of the ejection of a Hindu, particularly upper-caste Nair, leadership in the state Congress.

This debate has menacing portents for the party high command and the state government, particularly because they are led by two Christians — Sonia Gandhi and A.K. Antony, respectively. This caste-communal line of reasoning is being put forward essentially by a clutch of MLAs in the rebel group led by veteran leader K. Karunakaran, whose candidate Kodoth Govindan Nair was defeated in the poll on Monday. The Karunakaran camp has been for long viewed as the "Nair lobby" within the Congress in Kerala.

The message given by the manner in which Leader (that is how Karunakaran's supporters refer to him) was treated during the candidate-selection process and the vile strategy that was employed to defeat his nominee is that the high command sees no use in him or the community. This cannot be seen merely as an individual insult, it is the humiliation of the entire community, said a legislator belonging to his group.

Throughout Tuesday, journalists and political observers in the state capital became witness to the advancement of similar theories by several others in the group, including several MLAs.



Sonia Gandhi with the Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of Ismaili Muslims, at her residence in New Delhi on Tuesday. (PTI)

The suggestion that one of the victorious official candidates — former state unit president Theenala Balakrishna Pillai — also belongs to the Nair community was treated with derision by the advocates of this theory.

"Karunakaran represented the true strength of the Nair community in the state's social and political spheres. A political has-been like Pillai cannot claim to represent the community," said another MLA, who is also a leader of the Nair Service Society, a social organisation of the Nairs.

Though the debate has caught on in the internal circles of the Congress, the overt political climate in Kerala on Tuesday was one of relative calm.

There was no concrete move from the warring Congress factions or from the Opposition CPM, barring a statement from Karunakaran alleging the involvement of a particular liquor lobby in "threatening and buying over several MLAs" who would have otherwise voted for his nominee.

Karunakaran did not name the liquor lobby but the general impression is that his comment was aimed at relatives of AICC general secretary Vayalar Ravi, who was one of the official candidates who emerged victorious in the Rajya Sabha election.

This comment also had a caste angle, because Ravi belongs to backward class Ezhava community, which has traditionally locked horns with the Nairs in societal interaction.

only in June-July

However, indications are that the Karunakaran group would ultimately end up with 18 to 20 MLAs in its fold. The official Congress leadership is apparently "working on" five to seven MLAs of the group and has reportedly succeeded in turning them around.

But even the departure of 18 MLAs from the Congress to the Opposition ranks will make life difficult for the UDF and particularly for chief minister Antony. For the reduced majority in the Assembly would make Antony more dependant on the Indian Union Muslim League and the Kerala Congress (Mani), two parties with a strong minority base.

Risk lurks in kid gloves

K. SUBRAHMANYA

New Delhi, April 15: The victory of the two official Congress nominees in Monday's Rajya Sabha election from Kerala has saved the high command from embarrassment but the outcome has left the party bruised at the wrong time.

The party leadership's reluctance to even talk about initiating disciplinary action against K. Karunakaran, the rebel leader who had put up Kodoth Govindan Nair of his 'I group' to challenge the two official nominees, speaks for itself.

Nair, whom the high command had got expelled after he refused to retire from the race last week, has lost.

But in the process, Karunakaran has demonstrated that he is still a force to reckon with in state politics with a third of the Congress' 62 MLAs defying the high command and voting for Nair.

The Congress high command is realistic enough to read the situation appropriately as it has dropped enough hints that all will be forgiven if Karunakaran did not indulge in more provocative activities against it or the UDF government in the state headed by his arch rival A.K. Antony.

For the same reason, the high command might also not remove K. Muraleedharan. Karunakaran's son, as KPCC chief, though some central leaders were believed to be angry that he was covertly working for the rebel candidate while overtly being the high command's man in the saddle.

According to sources, R.K. Dhawan and Ghulam Nabi Azad, the two central observers who went to Kerala to oversee yesterday's elections, have recommended to party president Sonia Gandhi that no precipitate steps should be initiated over the Kerala veteran's

anti-party activities.

Much as the central leadership would like to gloss over the development by describing it as a "unique situation confined to Kerala", Sonia stares at a threat of several party veterans elsewhere getting emboldened by the Karunakaran case.

It is by now widely believed that the clamour for berths by several senior leaders who are without formal positions is the main reason why Sonia has not been able to effect the much-awaited shuffle of her AICC team.

The shuffle, when it happens, runs the risk of being reduced to an exercise in balancing the claims and counter-claims of various leaders. It may fall short of the intended objective of putting in place an effective team of leaders to prepare the party for the big poll challenges ahead.

Some restless leaders are also learnt to be cobbling together new equations to assert themselves. The contemplated changes in some states, too, are getting stalled. Some of the party's allied organisations are also virtually without functioning heads.

An AICC functionary said the conflicting pulls and pressures would now force "the party chief to come up with a package" to reorganise the party set-up at various levels.

But V.C. Shukla, the party's disgruntled leader in Chhattisgarh, has chosen not to wait for the package and has already left the Congress.

The state Congress leadership under chief minister Ajit Jogi has been dismissive of Shukla's decision to join Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party.

Not many in the central leadership seem to share that perception as the Assembly elections are due in about six months.

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DEALING WITH DISSIDENCE

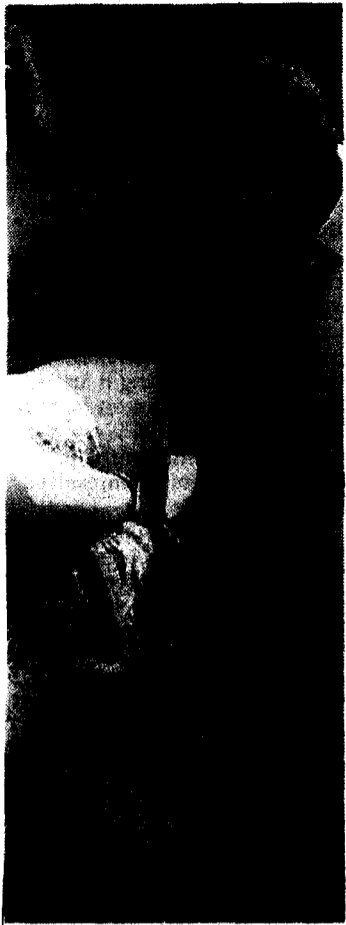
THE NO-NONSENSE APPROACH of the Congress high command in dealing with factional wars in Kerala seems to have been vindicated by the victory of the official nominees of the party in the Rajya Sabha elections. By acting firmly against the rebel candidate, Kodoth Govindan Nair, and, at the same time, refraining from striking at the leader of the dissident faction, K. Karunakaran, the AICC president, Sonia Gandhi, ended for the moment what could have been a long crisis phase for the Kerala unit of the Congress. But only for the moment. After having cramped the space for inner-party squabbling, Ms. Gandhi still ensured enough room for dissenters to patch up and return to the mainstream, but the past record of Mr. Karunakaran does not raise hopes of any lasting compromise. In the endless battle against his rival in the party, the Chief Minister, A.K. Antony, Mr. Karunakaran has always appeared ready to frontally take on the AICC high command. The Rajya Sabha elections might be out of the way, but Mr. Karunakaran, going by his recent statements, can be expected to find new opportunities to come up with real or imagined grievances.

Ever since he was displaced as the Chief Minister in 1995, he has been on a collision course with the AICC high command, not over questions of ideology, but over issues of accommodating his family members and faction loyalists in the party organisation or in the seat distribution for Assembly, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha elections. Not surprisingly, whatever the political gloss he might put to his actions, Mr. Karunakaran is being seen as putting family and faction above the party. And, ironically, it is Mr. Antony, on the political ascendant with the full backing of the party high command, who is coming through as the victim of the factional wars of the Congress, and not Mr. Karunakaran, the man on the wane. The last time Mr. Karunakaran triggered a similar crisis was over the ticket distribution for the 2001 Assembly election when his daughter, Padmaja Venugopal, did not figure in

the candidates list. On that occasion, the party high command, though clearly unhappy with his ways, met him halfway, accommodating many of his supporters but keeping Ms. Padmaja Venugopal out. Even so, after the Assembly elections, she was made chairperson of the Kerala Tourism Development Corporation in apparent recognition of the trouble-creating potential of the Karunakaran faction. Actually, Mr. Karunakaran could not have much to complain about. He managed to make his son, K. Muralidharan, the KPCC president. By repeatedly giving in to the combination of threats and blackmail from the senior leader, the high command would only have engendered indiscipline in the party ranks. In recent months, even his son veered away from the confrontational politics of Mr. Karunakaran who was turning out to be the voice of the opposition within the ruling party. During the latest crisis, Mr. Muralidharan, despite pushing his own personal agenda in the faction-ridden politics of the State, did his best to stall disciplinary action against his father. But, he could have continued to side with Mr. Karunakaran only at the risk of compromising his own position as KPCC president. It is to the credit of the AICC high command that at least Mr. Muralidharan was made to see the dangers of letting the party be held to ransom by Mr. Karunakaran.

The future course of events would be dictated by the strategy to be adopted by Mr. Karunakaran. But the landslide victory obtained by the United Democratic Front means that even if all the supporters of Mr. Karunakaran in the Assembly, 27 on last count, withdraw support, there would be no real danger to the Antony Government. Another misadventure would not do him or his faction any good. In such a scenario, what might look like a half-measure on the part of the high command — expelling the rebel candidate but sparing the faction leader and the dissident MLAs — could turn out to be good strategy. Keeping the party together without yielding to the pressure tactics of factional leaders.

15 APR 2003



the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, at the funeral of a fire accident in Gaganpur constituency on Tuesday. She is seen talking to the victims. — PTI

By Inder Malhotra

Even at the risk of being accused of labouring the point one must return to the painful subject of what can be called this country's seemingly incurable holiday mania. A huge majority of Indians has just enjoyed five consecutive holidays and is looking ahead to a run of another five after just two "working days" on Wednesday and Thursday. But an individual who thinks that those who had pushed off to the hills or the seashore will not rush back to the workplace for the inconvenient 48-hour period before embarking on the second phase of holidays ought to think again. For resourceful and the innovative always manage to bypass the brief interregnum by the simple expedient of taking casual leave well in advance or by faxing to their bosses a medical certificate announcing a sudden onset of illness.

The French, who have contributed to the English language the lovely expression "French leave", describe the art of combining two narrowly separated stretches of holidays as "doing the bridge". They need to be told that in this kind "bridge-building" we Indians leave them flat on the doormat. No wonder, therefore, what we are going through at present is a fortnight of Sundays and, if

Oil prices cut

Price has been cut to Rs. 26.70. Changes come into effect from midnight.

The price was hinted at earlier last week. Petroleum Minister, Ram Naik, said that global crude oil prices having fallen, the oil companies were likely to reduce prices accordingly. He gave data to show that since the Iraq war began, the prices had risen to a three-month high of \$34.73 a barrel.

Oil companies have not reduced the prices of petrol and diesel to the extent of the fall in global prices because the earlier increase had covered the entire cost of the increase in global rates.

Consumers have been faced with successive price hikes over the last three months. Petrol is now selling at around Rs. 5 a litre for petrol and diesel.

Quarterly News

Dear Unit Holder,

Equity markets across the world are showing factors, ranging from structural changes to geopolitical tensions. Attention is being drawn to the

In this regard, it is important to note that the momentum of country returns within the last few months appears to be slowing down. Investors are searching for secular growth opportunities and a new hate relationship with technology.

A look at the performance of Russia, Indonesia and Thailand has impressed by the results achieved by investors.

MD-10
16/4

DEALING WITH DISSIDENCE

THE NO-NONSENSE APPROACH of the Congress high command in dealing with factional wars in Kerala seems to have been vindicated by the victory of the official nominees of the party in the Rajya Sabha elections. By acting firmly against the rebel candidate, Kodoth Govindan Nair, and, at the same time, refraining from striking at the leader of the dissident faction, K. Karunakaran, the AICC president, Sonia Gandhi, ended for the moment what could have been a long crisis phase for the Kerala unit of the Congress. But only for the moment. After having cramped the space for inner-party squabbling, Ms. Gandhi still ensured enough room for dissenters to patch up and return to the mainstream, but the past record of Mr. Karunakaran does not raise hopes of any lasting compromise. In the endless battle against his rival in the party, the Chief Minister, A.K. Antony, Mr. Karunakaran has always appeared ready to frontally take on the AICC high command. The Rajya Sabha elections might be out of the way, but Mr. Karunakaran, going by his recent statements, can be expected to find new opportunities to come up with real or imagined grievances.

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The future course of events would be dictated by the strategy to be adopted by Mr. Karunakaran. But the landslide victory obtained by the United Democratic Front means that even if all the supporters of Mr. Karunakaran in the Assembly, 27 on last count, withdraw support, there would be no real danger to the Antony Government. Another misadventure would not do him or his faction any good. In such a scenario, what might look like a half-measure on the part of the high command — expelling the rebel candidate but sparing the faction leader and the dissident MLAs — could turn out to be good strategy. Keeping the party together without yielding to the pressure tactics of factional leaders.

16 APR 2003

THE HINDU

Cong. expels rebel candidate

184 By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, APRIL 9. In a bid to send out a strong message to the Karunakaran faction of its Kerala unit, the Congress today decided to expel the Kasaragod District Congress Committee president, Kodoth Govindan Nair, from the party for six years for "refusing to withdraw" from the Rajya Sabha elections from the State, despite the party president, Sonia Gandhi, asking him to do so.

The decision was taken after the senior Congress leader, K. Karunakaran's refusal to withdraw Mr. Nair from the contest which had kicked up a storm within the party unit. However, there is no move as of now to rein in or issue a show cause notice to Mr. Karunakaran for triggering the crisis.

Even as the State PCC president, K. Muraleedharan, told presspersons that the expulsion decision had been taken by Ms. Gandhi, senior leaders maintained that the Congress president had left it to the two general secretaries — Ambika Soni, in-charge of the State, and Oscar Fernandes who is responsible for organisational matters — and the KPCC president.

The expulsion order issued by Mr. Muraleedharan said the disciplinary action was being taken according to the party constitution. Mr. Muraleedharan has also written to all party MLAs, directing them to vote for the official candidates, Vayalar Ravi and T. Balakrishna Pillai.

Soon after issuing the letters, Mr. Muraleedharan spoke to Mr. Karunakaran and Mr. Nair. With Mr. Karunakaran sticking to his guns, Mr.

Nair told the KPCC president that he would obey the senior leader's directions.

That he had reservations about resorting to disciplinary action was something Mr. Muraleedharan did not try to hide. "I cautioned the Congress president about the consequences of such action when I met her last evening, but she insisted that stern action ought to be taken. Also, she said: we will face the crisis."

On whether Mr. Nair's expulsion was intended to be a warning to Mr. Karunakaran, he said: "He is not someone who can be threatened easily". As PCC president he would not recommend action against Mr. Karunakaran, he said to another question. As for action against MLAs who vote for Mr. Nair, the issue would be addressed after polling.

This was confirmed by senior leaders who maintained that the MLAs who proposed and signed Mr. Nair's nomination papers did not warrant similar disciplinary action as of now as they had supported his candidature prior to the day of withdrawal. "After that it is the responsibility of the candidate to pull out when the party has announced its official candidates." Add to this the fact that Ms. Gandhi had on Tuesday specifically told Mr. Muraleedharan to ask Mr. Nair to withdraw from the contest.

While an observer would be sent from Delhi to monitor the elections, the AICC view is that the State leadership "is capable of ensuring the victory of the official candidates".

As for the allies in the Congress-led UDF Government, Mr. Muraleedharan said it was customary for them to vote with the party.

11 01 APR 2003

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THE HINDU

RAJASTHAN RALLY / SHOW OF WOMAN POWER

Sonia blames NDA Govt. for raking up non-issues

By Sunny Sebastian

9-P-P
conf

MLA - "

SUMERPUR (RAJASTHAN), APRIL 4. The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, today blamed the BJP-led Government at the Centre for the farmers' plight. Growing costs of farm inputs, coupled with declining productivity and non-remunerative prices were driving them to desperation and even resort to suicide, but the Government was doing nothing to help them, she said at a farmers' rally in this south-west Rajasthan town in Pali district.

Ms. Gandhi was in Rajasthan for the second time in a span of 20 days to launch the World Bank-funded Rajasthan Water Sector Restructuring Project (RWSRP) at Jawai Dam, near here. The occasion looked more like a political rally and the turnout, especially of village women, was impressive.

In fact, women mostly from the districts of Pali, Jalore and Sirohi, formed more than 50 per cent of the crowd that had come to listen to the 17-minute speech of Ms. Gandhi.

Barring the Chief Minister, Ashok Gehlot, all others on the dais were women — Sonia Gandhi, her political adviser, Ambika Soni, the Rajasthan PCC(I) president, Girija Vyas, the Rajasthan Deputy Chief Minister, Kamla, and the State Forest Minister and local

MLA, Bina Kak. And, they did not miss the point in their speeches. It was a show of woman power all the way.

Ms. Gandhi said the Congress would repeat a Himachal in Rajasthan in the coming elections. The Gujarat results were passe. "The divisive policies of the BJP had been rejected by the people of Himachal Pradesh. I am hopeful that in the days to come Rajasthan also will do the same."

Ms. Gandhi spoke on water conservation, the need to launch a nationwide campaign on water, the plight of the farmers who would be hit most when water gets scarce and the lack of grassroots-level consultations when the policies concerning farmers and rural people are made. Referring to the problems of cane growers in Uttar Pradesh, she said the farmers were better taken care of in the Congress-ruled States.

"As long as farmers are unhappy, the nation cannot be happy." She recalled the words of Jawaharlal Nehru that "all things can wait, but agriculture cannot." The partymen discussed grassroots-level issues at bloc-level and the suggestions made there were being looked into.

Progress monitored

Ms. Gandhi told the audience that she was monitoring the progress of the Con-

gress-ruled States. "I ask the Chief Ministers for *hisaab* (details) at regular intervals," she said.

Ms. Gandhi referred to the Centre's "unsympathetic attitude" towards the drought-affected people of Rajasthan. "You know the efforts being made by your Chief Minister pleading for more assistance from the Centre," she observed and assured that the party would keep the pressure on for more Central assistance. The Centre should consider the case of all States with a sense of justice and fairplay.

"It should be like parents looking at their children. No one should be discriminated against".

The BJP and its allies were blaming the States in order to hide their own shortcomings, Ms. Gandhi said, adding that to divert the focus from the real issues they were raking up communal and emotional issues.

"The NDA Government is anti-farmer and anti-poor. It is a Government which generates unemployment."

Mr. Gehlot said the Central assistance to Rajasthan was inadequate.

The next three months would be crucial for the State in terms of drought relief.

Dr. Vyas, Ms. Kamla and Ms. Kak said the people wanted to see Ms. Gandhi as the Prime Minister.

THE HINDU

5 APR 2003

Iraq war is against global laws, says Sonia

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, MARCH 30. The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, today said the U.S.-led war on Iraq "is against all international laws and conventions".

This is the second time in as many days that she has spoken out against the war.

Addressing a party rally here, she said the Congress was in favour of a peaceful resolution of the conflict through the aegis of the United Nations.

"A just and honourable solution acceptable to all parties must be found through the U.N.," she said. She also expressed her party's solidarity with the people of Iraq.

"*Congress Iraq ke begunah longe ke saath hai.* (The Congress is with the innocent people of Iraq.) They are being made to suffer for no fault of theirs and are the worst sufferers of this catastrophe," Ms. Gandhi said.

She was also critical of the position taken by the NDA Government on the war and regretted that India had lost its voice on such issues at the international fora. Ms. Gandhi had spoken out against the war during her inaugural speech at the national convention of her party's block presidents on Friday.



The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, at the "Bharat Bachao Rally" at the Ramlila Ground in New Delhi on Sunday. The party leader, Kamalnath, is at the extreme left. — Photo: S. Subramaniam

The issue also figured prominently in the discussion on the international situation, at the two-day convention.

The CWC member and head

of the AICC's foreign affairs department, Natwar Singh, criticised the NDA Government's inability to reflect the sentiments of the people on the Iraq war.

THE HINDU

31 MAR 2003

98 P. 507 ✓/41

A CREDIBLE PROBE NEEDED

283 119-10

IN THE ALREADY politically volatile State of Gujarat, the murder of a former BJP Minister, Haren Pandya, a strong critic of the Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, in broad daylight in a busy locality raises disturbing questions about security and the law and order situation. Although Mr. Modi sought to deflate criticism by straightaway asking the Centre to institute an inquiry by the Central Bureau of Investigation, the killing of his prominent rival within the ruling party should provide enough ammunition for the Congress Opposition. Investigations are yet to make any headway, but while the Congress is throwing a mixture of innuendo and allegations at Mr. Modi, the State Government is going to the other extreme of ruling out the possibility of the killing being a "political murder". And, the BJP, the VHP and other Hindutva forces are trying to portray the murder as part of "jehadi" killings. All these only underscore the need for a quick and impartial probe by the Central agency to put at rest all doubts in the public mind about the killing of a high-profile leader.

Although Mr. Pandya had slipped off from the centrestage of Gujarat politics after he was denied the ticket in the Assembly election at the instance of Mr. Modi, he still symbolised the resistance to the Modi brand of politics within the State unit of the BJP. His differences with Mr. Modi might have flowed from an intense political rivalry rather than any ideological dispute, but Mr. Pandya, a confidant of the former Chief Minister, Keshubhai Patel, another anti-Modi face in the BJP camp, showed the capability, when it mattered the most, to take on the hate politics of Moditva. He was widely believed to have been the Minister who appeared before an independent tribunal probing the Gujarat riots and exposed the complicity of the State machinery in the

systematic violence against the minorities. The controversy over his appearance before the tribunal finally led to his resignation from the Modi Cabinet in August 2002. Indeed, this cost him his Assembly constituency too in the year-end election, as Mr. Modi managed to keep him out of the electoral race despite his enjoying the backing of the BJP high command. The murder happened when he was about to be made a member of the party's national executive. The new post would have taken him away from Mr. Modi's sphere of influence even while serving as a reward for his adherence to party discipline during a difficult period.

Apart from acting as a check on Mr. Modi, Mr. Pandya had also alienated powerful sections in the State during his tenure in the Keshubhai Patel Ministry. In June 2000, he acted tough following a violent conflict between two major cable television operators even at the risk of inviting the wrath of a ministerial colleague. At that time too, he had threatened to resign, but Mr. Patel persuaded him to stay. And, subsequent to the January 2001 earthquake, he detained a few powerful builders holding them responsible for the collapse of some buildings. Without doubt, Mr. Pandya had more than his share of enemies during his years as a Minister in Gujarat. And, although Mr. Pandya had not communicated to the State Government any threat perception, the withdrawal of his personal security has also become a matter of controversy. Several theories have been floated about his murder. Whether a CBI inquiry is instituted because of the suspected involvement of inter-State gangsters, or because of the need to enhance the credibility of the investigations, it is imperative to probe the murder from all angles in a transparent and credible manner.

HINDU

28 MAR 2003

Advani sees 'terrorist hand' in Pandya murder

By Manas Dasgupta

AHMEDABAD, MARCH 27. Even as police are still groping in the dark for clues to the murder here on Wednesday of the former Gujarat Minister of State for Home and Revenue, Haren Pandya, the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, today said he suspected the involvement of terrorists and underworld dons.

Both Mr. Advani and the BJP national president, Venkaiah Naidu, ruled out any "political motive" behind the murder of Mr. Pandya.

"It is absurd to think about any political angle in the murder," Mr. Advani said while Mr. Naidu lambasted the Congress for bringing politics into such a tragic incident.

Mr. Pandya's body was cremated here this afternoon in the presence of Mr. Advani, Mr. Naidu, the Union Ministers, Kashiram Rana, Arun Jaitley and Harin Pathak, the Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, his Cabinet colleagues, the former Chief Minister, Keshubhai Patel, and a host of his supporters and BJP workers.

The Pradesh Congress president, Shankarsinh Waghela, and some other Congress leaders also visited Mr. Pandya's residence to pay homage.

The Gujarat bandh call given

by both the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the State Congress protesting the killing evoked a partial response.

Mr. Modi, who had forced Mr. Pandya to resign from his Cabinet last year and was also instrumental in denying him the BJP ticket for the December Assembly elections, again had a tough time when he reached Mr. Pandya's residence today.

Mr. Pandya's supporters booed and heckled him but the presence of Mr. Advani saved the situation. Mr. Advani also visited the spot of the crime near Law Garden after calling on Mr. Pandya's family members at his residence and later held meetings with senior police and Government officials at the circuit house.

He later denied that the State Government had withdrawn the security cover for Mr. Pandya. Mr. Advani said Mr. Pandya himself did not want the security cover but following the incident, he had asked the State Government to draw a list of people who might need security cover. Apparently suspecting a "terrorist hand" behind the murder, Mr. Advani said the unfortunate incident had proved that the mafia-terrorist nexus was still strong in the State.

CBI team leaves: Page 11

HINDU

28 MAR 2003

Pandya murder a brutal act of terror: Advani

2873
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Ahmedabad: Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani described the killing of former Gujarat minister Haren Pandya as a "brutal act of terrorism".

Dismissing allegations that "political rivalry" was the reason for the killing, he drew parallels between Mr Pandya's killing and the recent massacre in Kashmir where 24 Pandits were killed. "In the last one week there have been two instances of terrorism which have rocked the nation... first the Kashmir killing and then the killing of Pandya in Ahmedabad," Mr Advani said while addressing the media at the Law Garden, the spot where Mr Pandya was shot.

Mr Advani said that he had been closely following the investigations. On being asked as to whether he was inquiring into why the former minister was denied a security cover, he said, "I am closely scrutinising all aspects". The deputy PM said he had been informed that even as a minister he preferred to move around freely. "He (Pandya) had his own ways," he said.

Chief minister Narendra Modi remained quiet during the press briefing and looked visibly uncomfortable. Meanwhile, the police managed to obtain the description of the "hired assassin" and the manner in which the murder was carried out from a lone eye-witness.

The eye-witness—an absolute illiterate from UP—who was opening his shop near Law Garden at around 7.40 a.m. on Wednesday said that he saw Mr Pandya parking his car and just when he was about to roll up the window next to the driver's seat, a man in his mid-twenties walked up and fired some 5-6 rounds inside the car. He then half-walked, half-ran towards a waiting vehicle.

He also admitted that he was aware of the victim's

The day after



- Political rivalry not reason for murder, says Advani
- Police get eye-witness description of incident, assassin
- 0.32 mm bore revolver used
- CBI team arrives from Delhi

identity and had heard the gunshots. The assailant was wearing "black pants and a dark open shirt" and was almost clean-shaven.

"We are in the process of creating a computerised sketch of the assailant based on this description," a top official told this paper on Thursday.

He said the murder bore the stamp of a highly skilled professional killer and that initial investigations indicated that it could have been a 'supari' killing.

Earlier, BJP president M. Venkaiah Naidu told reporters that the possibility of the involvement of the Dawood gang had prompted a CBI probe into the murder.

On Thursday evening, a 21-member team from the special crime branch of the CBI led by joint director S.P. Srivastava flew in from New Delhi to take over the investigation.

Meanwhile the day-long bandh called by the Congress and the VHP evoked a partial response in the state

28 MAR 2003

THE TIMES OF INDIA

Haren Pandya shot dead

9-P-P
138P
Statesman News Service

GANDHINAGAR, March 26. — Gujarat's former MoS for home Mr Haren Pandya (42) was shot dead today outside the Ahmedabad Law Garden.

He was found with multiple bullet injuries in his Maruti car around 11 a.m. and taken to VS Hospital, where he was declared "brought dead". Emergency

doctors had even tried cardio-respiratory resuscitation. By noon it was certified that the BJP leader and former RSS and Bajrang Dal activist had been assassinated. A doctor said: "There was a large wound in the neck and some other wounds on the right side of the body. His clothes were drenched in blood."

A post-mortem has confirmed that five bullets had been fired on Mr Pandya. There was a bullet mark on the front wind-shield of the car too. Mr Pandya was shot at point-blank range. He is believed to have been left unattended for over an hour, before being recognised and taken to the hospital. The car was parked facing a wall and all the windows, with dark film, were rolled up except for the one next to the driver's seat. A Hero Honda motor cycle, parked next to the car, remained unclaimed. Police are trying to find out the motor cycle's owner.

Immediately after Mr Pandya's death was

2713
made known, chief minister Mr Narendra Modi visited the hospital. Later he met officials in Gandhinagar and the state was put on "red-alert". Home secretary Mr K Nityanand announced a CBI inquiry after the Opposition demanded Mr Modi's resignation. Security in the city has been beefed up too with the RAF being deployed and police intensifying their search at all public places, including bus depot, railway station, airport, and other exit points, said Mr Nityanand.

Former chief minister Mr Keshubhai Patel and Mr Suresh Mehta and other senior BJP leaders visited the hospital. Shops in the vicinity were closed fearing trouble. Mr Pandya's body was taken to his home after 5 p.m. The cremation will be held tomorrow morning. Deputy Prime Minister Mr LK Advani and BJP president Mr Venkaiah Naidu are expected to attend the cremation.

Mr Advani has asked central intelligence agencies to assist the investigation into the killing after intelligence inputs indicated that underworld don Dawood Ibrahim's gang could have a role in the killing. Mr Advani has refused to speculate on who could be behind the killing. "We are leaving for Ahmedabad tomorrow to attend Pandya's funeral," Mr Naidu



A near relative of Haren Pandya grieves beside the body at his residence in Ahmedabad on Thursday. — AFP

Turn to page 2
More reports on page 4

27 MAR 2003

THE STATESMAN

S assures PM of support, but differs on economics

9-9-p-157P

The RSS assured the leader of its full support in the delegation led by Mr. Arshan, the Sangh head, in a meeting with Mr. Vajpayee over lunch at the Statesman today. Mr. Arshan held "frank and honest" discussions with Mr. Vajpayee and Mr. Arshan. The RSS chief was accompanied by Mr. H Seshadri, Mr. Arshan and Mr. Ram Madhav. The meeting continued for 10 hours.

However, the RSS leaders while felicitating Mr. Vajpayee on completing a five-year term in office sounded the Prime Minister about the Sangh's reservations on the economic policy of the government. "We expressed our happiness over the performance of the Vajpayee government, in fact, we are proud of it. But, there are differences of perception between the RSS and the government on the economic policy," Mr. Ram Madhav told The Statesman. The Prime Minister is learnt to have sought the Sangh's cooperation

in the coming months when the BJP will be facing elections not only in four major states but also the general elections in 2004. BJP leaders, including Mr. M Venkaiah Naidu conveyed to the Sangh leaders that the minimum the party expected from the RSS is that it should not indulge in airing its grievances in public which give ammunition to the Opposition. It was generally agreed at the meeting that Sangh Parivar outfits, which include the BJP should not be working at cross purposes, the sources said. The role of the VHP also came up before the leaders which

has embarrassed the government on more than one occasion on the Ayodhya issue. The Ayodhya dispute was also raised at the luncheon meeting, but the subject was not discussed at length since the matter is pending before the Supreme Court, Mr. Madhav said. The RSS on its part tried to impress upon Mr. Vajpayee and Mr. Advani to repeal the Illegal Migrants Determination (by Tribunal) Act which has failed to determine the illegal migrants particularly from Bangladesh into the North-east. On the likely involvement of the

RSS in the electoral plans of the BJP, Mr. Madhav said it depended on the latter. "Should the BJP invite the RSS in its proposed camp to be held in the middle of summer, the Sangh will participate", Mr. Madhav added. Today's long meeting is being interpreted as an endorsement of the leadership of Mr. Vajpayee by the RSS. When asked, Mr. Madhav said, "We are more than proud of the performance of the government though there are areas of difference between the Sangh and the government". The PMO declined to offer any official comment on the luncheon meeting.

No question of quitting: Mayawati

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, MARCH 7. The Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Mayawati, today called on the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, and discussed the 'video tape' episode. Home Ministry sources said that Ms. Mayawati told Mr. Advani that the Samajwadi Party (SP) had timed the release of the tape — allegedly showing her asking the BSP MLAs and MPs to share kickbacks from the MP and MLA local area development schemes with the party — to coincide with an attempt to split her party.

The Samajwadi Party, she told Mr. Advani, had hoped that the outcry over what she called the forged tapes would create the momentum needed to "propel" BSP MLAs across the floor in sufficient numbers. Sources close to Mr. Advani said that the controversy would die down. It was seen as a political issue with no impact on either the arithmetic of Parliament or the outcome of the Assembly elections slated over the next six months.

Talking to waiting newsmen after the meeting, Ms. Mayawati said there was no

question of her tendering her resignation. She had instituted an investigation into "misuse of official funds", including the Chief Minister's discretionary fund at the time when the Samajwadi Party was in power.

If the inquiry indicted the SP leader, Mulayam Singh Yadav, her Government would take stern action against him. "He will not be spared," she said. She accused the SP of being "desperate" following the defeat of its no-confidence motion against her Government. She insisted that Mr. Yadav should "publicly apologise" for the "forged" and "edited" videotape.

The U.P. controversy was the subject of yet another heated exchange between the Opposition and the Treasury benches in the Lok Sabha today. The SP moved a privilege motion against Ms. Mayawati on the grounds that she had accused MPs of making money through their discretionary constituency funds.

Though the Speaker, Manohar Joshi, disallowed the privilege motion, the issue was the subject of a high-decibel exchange between the SP and the BSP, with the BJP

playing a supporting role. Mulayam Singh Yadav and Ramjilal Suman raised the issue as soon as the House met, saying that the U.P. Chief Minister had cast aspersions on members of Parliament.

Mr. Yadav alleged that threats were being held out to arrest him under POTA and the houses of his relatives were being raided.

The BSP MPs, led by Rashid Alvi took up the cudgels on behalf of Ms. Mayawati and described the allegations as false.

Heated exchanges erupted between the two sides and the Speaker had a tough time trying to bring order.

The issue figured again soon after zero hour and this time round the SP MPs sat in the well of the House to press their demand.

The BSP MPs also moved to the well shouting slogans. However, an ugly scene was averted with ruling party MPs prevailing upon the BSP MP's to resume their seat. The Opposition is planning to petition the President, seeking his intervention.

The Congress has already sought an appointment with the President.

8 MAR 2003

THE HINDU

Saffron spin on Ayodhya excavation order

Precedent could be set: Katiyar

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

LUCKNOW, March 8. — Uttar Pradesh BJP chief Mr Vinay Katiyar today welcomed the Allahabad High Court order for excavation around the disputed site in Ayodhya and said it could set a precedent with people making similar demand at other disputed historical sites.

"The High Court order to carry out excavations to resolve the long standing dispute needs to be welcomed... it could set a precedent with people demanding excavation of the historical sites to prove their claim," Mr Katiyar said while addressing the inaugural session of the party's two-day working committee meeting here.

In the same breath, the BJP leader urged the Muslim community to "hand over" the disputed area to Hindus for the construction of a Ram temple, implying — though not articulating — a threat of sorts.

The Allahabad High Court on March 5 had ordered the Archaeological Survey of India to undertake excavation of the disputed site to ascertain whether a temple existed at the place where Babari Masjid was built.

Without naming any community, the BJP leader also called for stern measures to control the rising population and said religious considerations should not come in the way of implementation of family planning programmes in the country. "When religion is not a consideration in other countries for implementing family

planning why is it being treated as one in our country," he asked, apropos of nothing in particular. Mr Katiyar claimed that though his party was leading the NDA at the Centre, it had not deviated from its policy on the demand for a Uniform Civil Code, the scrapping of Article 370 and a ban on cow slaughter.

In Delhi, the CPI-M took up the cudgels on behalf of those opposed to the court order, describing it as "unwarranted" given the fact that the Bench is hearing the title suit regarding ownership of land. A statement issued by the party's politburo said the order would only exacerbate the situation and that the disputed sites at Mathura and Varanasi — which the VHP claims as temples — would be targeted for excavation.

"It will not be possible for the ASI to excavate and come to any conclusion relevant to the title deed suit. Neither will it be possible to ascertain whether there was originally a Ram temple in the area, which has seen hundreds of temples being constructed over the centuries," the statement added.

And in Chennai, former prime minister Mr VP Singh added his tuppence worth to the political controversy generated, by pitching for an all-religion research centre to be built at the disputed site in Ayodhya. Addressing a press conference here, Mr Singh said he was of the opinion that the disputed land should not be given to any of the parties engaged in litigation for the possession of the land.

9 MAR 2003

THE STATESMAN

Saffron South

Assembly by-elections — especially in the southern states and particularly when the contestant is not a chief minister seeking election to the House — rarely draw attention elsewhere in the country. The Sattankulam assembly by-poll in Tamil Nadu was no exception to this rule, not least because commentators were preoccupied with the Congress-BJP power play in Himachal Pradesh. Consequently, the significance of the Sattankulam election has yet to be grasped. It was a landmark contest and one of the most bitterly-fought elections in recent years. Sattankulam was one of the last Congress strongholds in Tamil Nadu. By storming it, the AIADMK notched up its fifth consecutive by-election success in the past two years — a record that would be the envy of both the Congress and the BJP. This was, perhaps, the first assembly by-election where the DMK did not field a candidate, and chose to back the Congress, though not openly. The BJP too joined the high-stakes battle by throwing its weight behind J Jayalalithaa's AIADMK.

More than the DMK or the Congress, it is the BJP that is most embarrassed by the thumping victory of the AIADMK, which did not so much as acknowledge the BJP's 'unsolicited' support. Though it was trounced, the Congress at least had the saving grace in that the DMK did not openly proclaim its support; the DMK's campaigning was restricted to asking people not to vote for the AIADMK. Without doubt, Ms Jayalalithaa is not only the all-round winner but has forged ahead of the BJP in cultivating and capitalising on Hindutva vote-banks in Tamil Nadu. This should alert those who assume that the appeal of Hindutva is restricted to what is called the 'cow belt'. Hindutva forces are not confined to the north, nor to the familiar faces of the sangh parivar; they are emerging in different forms not only in Tamil Nadu but also in Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. While the BJP itself has made significant headway in these southern states — and is preparing to take on its present-day allies, like the TDP, through the appointment of M Venkaiah Naidu as party chief — there are other brands of saffron also blossoming. The Congress, despite its electoral successes in the north, needs to do some hard re-thinking about its dalliance with 'soft Hindutva', not least with reference to the south. Or it will be swallowed up in the many saffronised shades springing up across the country.

5 MAR 2003

THE TIMES OF INDIA

BLAME GAME BEGINS IN BJP

Infighting led to defeat in elections, says Vajpayee

By Neena Vyas

NEW DELHI, MARCH 2. The stunning defeat of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Himachal Pradesh has signalled the start of the blame game in the party, and it seems that the former Himachal Chief Minister and now Cabinet Minister, Shanta Kumar, has become the scapegoat.

Gujarat, the BJP is realising, was not the start of the revival of the party's electoral fortunes, but may have been a gift of the riots. Apparently, it admitted this today during a high-level meeting at the party office attended by the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, the Deputy Prime Minister, I.K. Advani, the party president, Venkaiah Naidu, the Law Minister, Arun Jaitley, and central party office-bearers, including the newly-inducted general secretary, Pramod Mahajan.

It was Mr. Advani who is reported to have remarked that but for Godhra and the subsequent gory events in Gujarat, the party could not have overcome the anti-incumbency factor to the extent of a two-thirds majority.

Since the BJP's Gujarat electoral victory was being attributed to the Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, this remark was seen as implying that even Mr. Modi could not have pulled it off if it had not been for the help he got from the Gujarat riots.

The meeting noted that the party could find no solace in the Himachal results, nor could it see any sign of "revival" of its fortunes in Uttar Pradesh where two by-elections were lost, but some comfort was available in the gains made in Nagaland and Meghalaya.

Mr. Vajpayee himself was reported to have blamed organisational weakness in the party and infighting in the State unit as the two most important factors that prevented it from overcoming a strong anti-incumbency wave.

Although Mr. Advani also agreed that the organisation was not in the best of health, Mr. Vajpayee's reference was being interpreted as finger-pointing at the party team led by Mr. Naidu under the overall direction of Mr. Advani.

That Mr. Kumar will take the major share in the blame game was evident when Mr.

Vajpayee took strong exception to his reported remarks yesterday that the results were the result of poor performance by the Dhumal Government and the people's anger that split out on voting day.

He is reported to have said that Mr. Kumar would be asked for an explanation, adding that the wrong message from the "infighting" between Mr. Kumar and Mr. Dhumal (who has resigned following the defeat) had gone down to the grassroots. "We should fight unitedly," Mr. Vajpayee is reported to have told the office-bearers.

Mr. Advani in fact handed out a commitment to Mr. Dhumal saying his performance had been good, emphasising that overcoming anti-incumbency was possible only through a strong organisation.

He blamed the defeat in Delhi elections nearly five years ago also on the infighting among the party's state leaders, although at that time it had become clear that a string of failures on the performance front — skyrocketing vegetable prices, power situation at its worst in decades, the mustard oil adulteration scandal, a dengue outbreak — had led to the BJP's rout.

10-1 273

Sonia sees saffron in red bastion

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
KOLKATA, FEBRUARY 10

IN HER first-ever rally at the Brigade Parade Ground as Congress president this afternoon, Sonia Gandhi dipped into history to hold the Marxists in Bengal responsible for bringing the BJP into power at the Centre. But in the red bastion, the thrust of her speech was more on the saffron as she described the entire BJP leadership as thoroughly "corrupt". She avoided any reference to Mamata Banerjee of Trinamool Congress.

"BJP's sole agenda is to cling on to power at any cost and for that they are ready to make any sacrifice," she said in Hindi. She charged the BJP for injecting poison into the Indian society, using religion as its weapon. According to her, the status quo on Ayodhya should be maintained as long as the court verdict is not out.

The Congress president said the BJP has neither the vision nor the direction to run a great country like India. "It was surviving on false promises and opportunism," she added.

Sonia accused the CPI(M) of joining hands with this communal outfit 14 years ago. "In their tirade against Indiraji and later against Rajivji, the CPI(M) joined hands with these elements," she said.

Referring to the state's present financial crisis, Sonia said it has now become difficult for the government to even pay its employees. There is high incidence of atrocities against women in Bengal and scores of Congress supporters have been murdered, she said, urging the Congressmen to fight back.

State Congress president Pranab Mukherjee and other leaders like Somen Mitra and Priyaranjan Das Munshi however, however, could not resist a dig at Mamata Banerjee.

Without naming the Trinamool chief, they said it was disgraceful that some leaders from Bengal were too keen on a Cabinet berth and waited for days in Delhi to get an appointment with BJP leaders. The National Congress is too big a party to be weakened by such leaders, they said.



Congress chief Sonia Gandhi with party leaders at the rally in Kolkata on Monday. Reuters

CPM rebel MP basks in Opp attention

SANTANU BANERJEE
KOLKATA, FEBRUARY 10

WHILE the state CPI(M) leadership has preferred to remain silent and left it to district-level leaders to showcase rebel Lok Sabha MP Radhika Ranjan Pramanik for his recent utterances against the party, the Opposition parties have already begun showing an interest in the recent developments.

While he has decided neither to quit the party nor as an MP, Pramanik seems to be enjoying all the attention that he has been getting from different quarters.

As expected, Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee met Pramanik, sitting Lok Sabha MP from South 24 Parganas district, at his residence yesterday and the hour-long meeting has already fuelled political speculations. "We have enjoyed a long relationship and I respect the veteran politician," Banerjee told *The Indian Express* here this afternoon. While she refused to divulge details of the meeting, she said: "I agree to what he

was trying to do. And things happen slowly."

Pramanik had earlier met with leaders of the Party for Democratic Socialism (PDS), a party formed by a breakaway CPI(M) group two years back under Saifuddin Chowdhury. The MP said that "I would ignore the showcase notice served by the party a few days back. I will not reply to the notice."

Admitting that PDS general secretary Samir Putatunda met him at his residence on Saturday, he said that he told Putatunda he's not joining the PDS or any other party as of now.

"We discussed political issues but we didn't ask him to join us," said Putatunda.

The state CPI(M) leadership, however, has maintained silence over the recent developments. According to sources, the party headquarters had sent its men to collect a cassette from a local TV channel where Pramanik reiterated his charges of "misuse of the MPLAD fund for the coming panchayat elections by party leaders at the district level and the organisation being run by an undemocratic coterie."

Didi threatens bandh over hike in power tariff

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
KOLKATA, FEBRUARY 10

UPPING the ante against the West Bengal government, Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee threatened to slap a 72-hour Bengal bandh if the government did not clarify its position on power tariff.

The threat comes at a time when the Left Front constituent Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) blasted its main ally CPI(M) openly on the law and order situation in a rally yesterday. Banerjee also took a swipe at some Congress leaders who had suggested that the Trinamool Congress "must snap its ties with the BJP-led NDA to forge a broader anti-BJP and CPI(M) front."

"It's too late in the day to prove us wrong when we say that there's no difference between the Congress and the CPI(M) in West Bengal or at the national level," she said. "When the RSP criticised the CPI(M) in their rally so bitterly, the Congress couldn't, which exposed the party to its workers."

Banerjee, who met Mayor Subrata Mukherjee — a member of her party — to ask him not to impose water tax, yesterday said: "It is a shame that the state government refused to appeal to the Supreme Court against the decision to do away with power cross subsidy. The government must bring out a white paper on this and on the additional security charges being imposed on electricity consumers."

Banerjee had earlier sought an assurance from Mukherjee that the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) would not impose any water tax.



Not a word yet on Sonia-Mulayam talks

Vinod Sharma & Saroj Nagi
New Delhi, February 3

THE EXACT contours of the Congress' ties with the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and at the Centre are still in the realm of conjecture with both sides maintaining a stoic silence about the nature of discussions between Sonia Gandhi and Mulayam Singh Yadav on Sunday night.

But the meeting has evidently effected a thaw in the Congress-SP ties that had hit a nadir when Sonia failed to respond to Mulayam's earlier overtures to back his claim for forming a government in Lucknow.

Informed sources said the talks on Sunday night covered a host of issues, including the political situation in UP. One positive outcome of the interaction

No one's talking about split

THE UP legislators' first meeting with Congress president Sonia Gandhi since the party's legislative wing split in the state failed to touch upon the reasons that left the CLP truncated.

Senior AICC leaders Motilal Vora and Ahmed Patel joined the CLP leader Pramod Tiwari in briefing the Congress president on the action plan they had drawn up for the party's MLAs to

keep them engaged. Besides deputing them for the Himachal Pradesh Assembly elections, it also asked them to mobilise support for a series of party conventions in UP and for a protest rally against the NDA government's anti-people policies in Delhi this month.

The meeting, lasting 20 minutes, clearly left a lot unsaid. Thirteen MLAs (out of 16) and the two MLCs who attended the



Sonia Gandhi

Trying to get to the bottom

meet later claimed before scribers that they stood united.

HTC, New Delhi

nath Chatterjee. However, CLP leader Pramod Tiwari

is believed to have been the subject of discussions between Mulayam and the

Congress president.

It is understood that the SP leaders held him responsible for the recent split in the CLP.

They said Tiwari encouraged the breakaway group out of hostility for the incarcerated MLA Raja Bhaiyya with whom he had a score to settle locally. Sonia's response to the SP's charges was not known.

But a section of the Congressmen are credited with the view that the CLP leader could be playing Mulayam's game. But, on their part, the SP duo are believed to have maintained that Tiwari and Pratapgarh MP Ratna Singh did not want an alternative government in UP on account of Raja Bhaiyya's close ties with the SP.

While on the issue of the Congress split, Amar Singh and Mulayam re-

ported. minded Sonia that they had informed her of the breakaway group's activities a month in advance. According to sources, they also argued that a fragmented non-BJP opposition could cost the Congress more in political and electoral terms.

The Gauriganj Assembly by-poll did not figure in the talks. But SP sources said that the question of withdrawal of their candidate cannot be delinked from the Congress' support for ridding the state of the Mayawati regime.

While so arguing, the sources underscored the need for the coming together of the two parties by citing Mayawati's treatment of Priyanka, the State Government's takeover of the Indira Pratishthan land and the lathicharge against Amar Singh at Amausi airport.

Opposition plans no-trust motion

THE ENTIRE opposition in UP will bring a no-confidence motion against the BSP-BJP government on the first day of the Assembly's Budget session, CLP leader Pramod Tiwari said.

Tiwari was speaking after Congress MLAs met Sonia Gandhi on Monday. He said a no-confidence motion would be brought against Speaker Kesari Nath Tripathi too.

The Congress has accused him of playing a partisan role. On Sunday, Sonia met Mulayam Singh Yadav and Amar Singh after seven of the eight breakaway Congress MLAs of the Akhil Bharatiya Congress Dal met in Lucknow to chalk out strategy.

HTC, New Delhi

DESHMUKH IS OUT

New Congress set-up in Maharashtra

IT'S now official. After days of uncertainty Maharashtra chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh has been replaced by Sushil Kumar Shinde. Having been chief minister for three years, Deshmukh was in no mood to relinquish the position, but pressure from dissidents, coalition partners and a desire to revamp the state set-up in time for the 2004 Assembly elections finally got the better of him. And like all the other "disciplined soldiers" of the Congress party he bowed to the wishes of the High Command, after a show of resistance sufficient to earn him brownie points later.

Deshmukh's term was dogged by dissidence and there have been three earlier attempts to dislodge him. In December 2000 party dissidents moved against him but the revolt fizzled out; the following year his government was again in trouble when during the Malegaon riots his deputy was unable to control the situation; and in 2002 the Shiv Sena and BJP tried to topple his government when the Peasants and Workers Party withdrew support. Deshmukh won the no-confidence motion by just seven votes.

But 2003 changed all that. While no official reason has been given for Deshmukh's removal except for the alleged need to change the state Congress organisation, a variety of factors have been working against him in recent times. Maharashtra is now in a serious financial crisis, tottering under a huge debt burden. Many sugar mills have shut down and others have defaulted on government-backed loans and are awaiting action from banks. The large cotton industry in the state is in a similar mess. There have been a spate of suicides by farmers who were unable to repay loans. "Non-performance" is a charge hurled at Deshmukh by his detractors — but that is not unusual. The Congress has in fact become very jittery after the Gujarat poll fiasco. Narendra Modi's huge public rally in Mumbai last week has made the Congress even more nervous. Not wanting to take chances on a chief minister who has so many enemies, they would like to put things in place long before D Day.

The state Congress chief Govindrao Adik has been a major thorn in Deshmukh's side, not allowing him to let the government work closely with the party. But it is strongly rumoured that Adik is on his way out too. Shinde's Dalit credentials and closeness to NCP leader Sharad Pawar have gone a long way in his being finally appointed. Shinde had come close to the top seat three times earlier, but on each occasion he appeared to lose out at the last moment. The Congress knows that the Dalit vote is vital in Maharashtra and with BJP having appropriated Dalits in Gujarat, they do not want a repeat performance in Maharashtra. Shinde will be the state's first Dalit chief minister. The other important factor is the Maratha vote-bank, which is why there is every possibility that Adik will be removed and replaced by a Maratha leader. Deshmukh will no doubt be appeased. What remains to be seen is whether the Congress' forward planning reaps any dividends. Shinde has his work cut out.

19 JAN 2003

MAHARASHTRA GETS FIRST DALIT CM

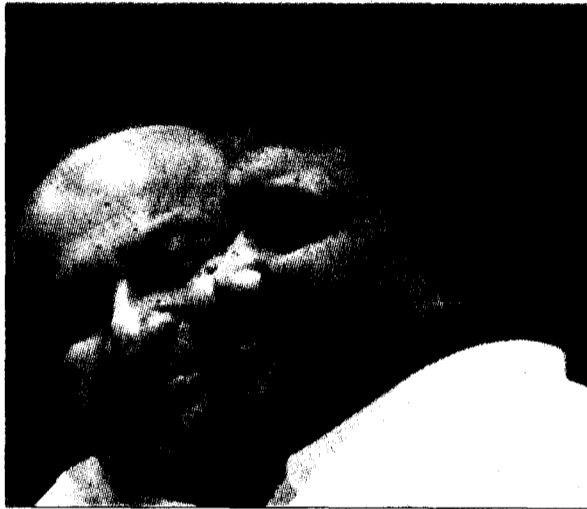
Shinde succeeds

Deshmukh

Statesman News Service

MUMBAI, Jan. 16. — Mr Sushil Kumar Shinde will be Maharashtra's new chief minister. He was today elected leader of the Congress Legislature Party in the state. The CLP passed a one-line resolution ratifying Mrs Sonia Gandhi's choice to replace Mr Vilasrao Deshmukh. Mr Shinde, who will be the state's first Dalit chief minister, is likely to be sworn in tomorrow. His name was proposed by Mr Deshmukh and seconded by MPCC chief Mr Govindrao Adik.

Mr Deshmukh said he was "very happy for his friend Sushilkumarji" and reaffirmed their togetherness through thick and thin. Senior party leaders, who were vying for the top post till yesterday, were a picture of bonhomie this afternoon in the presence of the AICC observers. The CLP passed



HEADS THEY ALL WIN: Mr Vilasrao Deshmukh (right) gets a hug from Mr Sushil Kumar Shinde in Mumbai on Thursday. — AFP

a resolution moved by Mr Rahidas Patil "authorising Mrs Gandhi to take a final decision on the matter".

Mr Vayalar Ravi, Mr Pranab Mukherjee and Mr Gulab Nabi Azad met Mr Deshmukh in the morning. They also met leaders of the NCP, Peasants and Workers' Party, Janata Dal (Secular)

and the Bharip Bahujan Samaj Party. Eleven Independents pledged support for the new chief minister.

In a statement, Mr Shinde said he would strive to reduce the state's debt burden. The government and the party should work together to fight communal forces in the state.

17 JAN 2003

THE STATESMAN

If Deshmukh goes, so will Adik: Cong

By Mahendra Ved
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: The Congress leadership on Tuesday let it be clearly known that it intends to be even-handed in dealing with Maharashtra affairs in that if chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh goes, so does his principal critic, PCC chief Govindrao Adik, for the sake of "cohesive functioning".

The only difference, a top party functionary said, was that while a successor to Deshmukh would be found as early as possible, Adik may be retained for a brief period and given a choice of being absorbed in the next cabinet.

As the central leadership decided on the three observers to attend the Congress Legislature Party meeting in Mumbai on Wednesday, the name of Sushil Kumar Shinde was being mentioned as Deshmukh's successor.

Shinde attended the party's Central Election Committee meeting, but there was no one-to-one meeting with party president Sonia Gandhi, officials present said.

The task of "taking in a wider canvas", as party general secretary in charge of Maharashtra, Vayalar Ravi, put it, has been entrusted to Ravi and two other stalwarts, Pranab Kumar Mukherjee and Ghulam Nabi Azad. They are scheduled to leave for Mumbai Wednesday morning. While Ravi and Mukherjee will fly out from here, Azad's schedule was uncertain as fog prevented him from arriving here, forcing him to take a train from Jammu.

It was Adik's turn to be summoned to 10, Janpath, Gandhi's residence on Tuesday morning. In a drill identical to that carried out by Deshmukh on Monday, he met her and then met Ravi. He later told reporters that he had "not been asked to resign", but would do so "if asked".

The scene shifted from here to Mumbai on Tuesday itself. The Congress was talking to NCP leaders who were relaying everything to their chief, Sharad Pawar, now abroad. Ravi said the entire drill would take a little more than a day and the observers would then report back to Gandhi.

Still tentative in its approach and keen to

Sonia summons Gehlot for talks

New Delhi: Congress president Sonia Gandhi's summons to Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot on Tuesday fuelled speculation about more changes.



Ashok Gehlot

AICC general-secretary Ambika Soni said Gehlot was called for consultations on the reported discontent in the state unit of the party over his leadership.

Recently, a three-member team comprising Soni, Pranab Mukherjee and P Shiv Shanker had visited Rajasthan in the wake of the party's debacle in the three assembly byelections and dissatisfaction expressed over Gehlot's leadership.

The team also held consultations with the Congress leadership in the state. PTI

give a democratic facade to the change, the three observers may talk to each of the 74 Congress MLAs and then attempt a collective interaction to gauge their minds.

This has been the Congress drill while attempting a change. But the next stage, of sending in a name from New Delhi, was being hotly denied. "The exercise is not being controlled from here," insisted a senior party functionary.

Party sources said the choice for the two posts and the method of making it would remain unconnected in that while the CM would have to be somebody acceptable to the other alliance partners, particularly the NCP, the PCC chief of necessity would have to be somebody who can carry the partymen along and prevent these very allies, besides the opposition BJP and Shiv Sena, from poaching on the party's support base.

● See Edit: Beyond Maharashtra, Page 14

15 JAN 2003

THE TIMES OF INDIA

Battening down

6/8 Congress looks to save face in N-E 5/1

Having lost in Gujarat, the Congress battens down for the fight in Nagaland, Tripura and Meghalaya. In more prosperous times during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when regional parties failed to deliver the goods, all seven North-east states formed an exclusive Congress club. Now, the Congress controls Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh and shares power in Meghalaya and Manipur. Curiously, Meghalaya does not have a single Congress member in the cabinet. The party feels "soft Hindutva" and "secularism" in Gujarat constituted a political minefield and prefers the old and safe development plank. Although the electoral fuse is yet to be ignited, the Congress in Tripura has already aligned with non-democratic and parochial forces like the Indigenous National Party of Tripura which comprises the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (now ruling the Tribal Area Autonomous District Council), Tripura National Volunteers and the Tripura Ujapaji Juba Samity. This may change the voting behaviour of Bengali and Muslim immigrants who have so long supported the party.

In Meghalaya the Congress will face stiff competition from the Nationalist Congress Party. It did return to power after the 1998 assembly elections but quit after 12 days, unable to prove its majority. Nagaland is poised for a keen contest but chief minister SC Jamir is confident the Congress will retain power, that the emergence in October of the Nagaland People's Front will pose no serious threat. But the fact remains that the NPF is in reality the opposition Nagaland People Council, only its nomenclature has changed and it is now headed by former moderate chief minister Vizol with the brief of bringing about a change in Naga politics. It hopes to contest all 60 assembly seats and it does have some former hopefuls. Besides, the election in Nagaland is taking place in the background of peace talks, the venue of which has shifted to Delhi. There may not be any correlation, but voters are likely to be influenced.

Vilasrao's fate hangs by spaghetti strap

By Mahendra Ved
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh's fate hung in balance on Monday night even as the most important state in the Congress kitty was certainly poised for major changes, taking place most likely in the course of this week.

Deshmukh, who met Congress President Sonia Gandhi and twice discussed with general secretary in charge, Vayalar Ravi, had agreed to abide by Gandhi's decision. Gandhi had "not asked him to resign", general secretary Ambika Soni announced to the media almost two hours after Deshmukh met Gandhi.

Deshmukh's successor may well be Sushil Kumar Shinde. None in the party was able to confirm reports that Shinde had flown from Sholapur to Pune by a chartered flight earlier in the day and thence, had flown to Delhi and that he was expected late Monday night.

But the leadership issue was wide open in that Gandhi decided that Ravi and two other senior leaders, probably Congress Working Committee members, "acceptable to all sections in Maharashtra" as a party source put it, would be in Mumbai on Wednesday to hold discussions with party legislators.

While declining to say that the central leaders would be discussing a change at the top in the state, the sources said "everything" could be discussed.

If Deshmukh is replaced by Shinde, then PCC chief Govindrao Adik may also have to go. Names of Ranjit Deshmukh, Prithviraj Chavan and Rohidas Patil are being mentioned in this regard.

Congress chief ministers have in the recent past been directed to resign and things happened quickly. The political sense of Monday night's devel-



Chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh arrives for talks with Congress president Sonia Gandhi at her residence in New Delhi on Monday evening.

opments could well be that Gandhi wants to take the entire Maharashtra Congress along and would like to give the entire drill a democratic facade.

There were clear indications of the change after Deshmukh, who denied in Mumbai over the weekend that he had been summoned but, nevertheless, arrived here in the afternoon. He travelled by a private car and chose not to take an official vehicle.

Next, after spending nearly 45 minutes with Gandhi, apparently in an one-

to-one discussion, he left the media waiting at 10, Janpath, Gandhi's residence high and dry, leaving by a side gate. This sent the TV channels into hyper action, speculating that he had submitted a letter of resignation to Gandhi, or that he had been asked to resign and that he was dashing back to Mumbai.

A rationale of his act of scooting by the side gate was subsequently available in the fact that Deshmukh met Ravi at an undisclosed destination, away from the media glare. It was during this meeting, sources said, that Deshmukh repeated what he had told Gandhi, that he would abide by whatever decision she might take on the leadership issue.

For the Congress, enforcing a leadership is not easy in that Deshmukh heads a multi-party coalition. Other partners, particularly, Sharad Pawar and his Nationalist Congress Party, would need to be in the picture. Sources said the matter was still within the Congress, but "partners would be taken into confidence."

Deshmukh was appointed to head the coalition because of his anti-Pawar image by a Congress that was smarting under Pawar's tirade against Gandhi on the ground of her being "foreign born." His replacement by Shinde, an SC Rajya Sabha member and a former police official brought into public life by Pawar, would be a gesture to Pawar who has been displaying conciliatory signs towards Gandhi and seeking a pre-poll alliance with the Congress, even though the assembly elections are a good two years away.

For the Congress, a gesture to Pawar would also help splitting the NCP in Meghalaya, due to go to the polls next month, where P A Sangma continues to oppose Gandhi and wants to fight the Congress.

Pawar's nod proves crucial for face-lift

By Prakash Joshi
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Mumbai: A relatively poor performance report, pressure from the Congress rank and file and the MPCC to give a face-lift to the government's image, and the sweeping of neighbouring Gujarat by the BJP are among the factors which have prompted the Congress high command to hunt for a replacement for chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh.

During its three-year tenure the Deshmukh government had run up a huge debt of about Rs 75,000 crores, failed to attract any worthwhile investment in the state and what is worse, demonstrated little willingness to kick a moribund administration to life. What is worse, the level of corruption had also increased to alarming levels, partly due to the venality of several ministers belonging to the Nationalist Congress Party.

Over the past two years, the crisis has been building within the Congress. Despite persistent complaints from Mr Deshmukh's detractors, the party high command did not take serious note of the demand to replace the CM. One of the reasons was that the NCP, which is a major constituent of the Democratic Front government, was averse to the removal of Mr Deshmukh.

But, the situation changed a few months ago, when NCP leader Sharad Pawar made it clear to the Congress leadership that he had no objection to the easing out of Mr Deshmukh from office. Mr Pawar had told TNN: "A chappati should not be cooked only on one side and hence it should be turned on its side. Else it will get burnt."

Cong puts lid on clamour for change of CMs

Vilasrao, Gehlot under scanner

By Mahendra Ved
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: The Congress central leadership is under intense pressure to effect changes in Rajasthan and Maharashtra, but no immediate action is being contemplated. Party sources say this is mainly because the Congress wants to avoid giving the impression of a knee-jerk reaction to the Gujarat debacle.

"Nothing is on the cards," Vayalar Ravi, general secretary, back after a short stay in Mumbai, said on Monday about Maharashtra.

In the case of Rajasthan, chief minister Ashok Gehlot and PCC chief Girija Vyas are both sought to be replaced before the perceived anti-incumbency factor hurts the party's interests in the elections due later this year.

The three-member Manifesto Implementation Committee of the party that visited Jaipur last week, ostensibly to review the drought situation, is understood to have submitted a report recommending a change. Senior leaders Ambika Soni, Pranab Mukherjee and P. Shiv Shankar comprised the team that sought the action even before the leadership comes to grips with the four states that are scheduled to go to the polls in February-March.

Party sources say K. Nat-

war Singh, who has been advising party chief Sonia Gandhi on Rajasthan affairs, has also reportedly favoured a change.

As for Maharashtra, this is the third time in the last few months that pressure has been mounted to remove chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh. But the fact that he heads a multi-party coalition makes it that much difficult for the Congress to act.

A recent factor that has come into play is the insistence of Nationalist Congress Party chief Sharad Pawar that the Congress should strike a clear pre-poll alliance with like-minded parties. "We are already in a coalition," both Mr Ravi and party spokesman Jaipal Reddy averred. Mr Ravi went a step further, emphasising that the present coalition was up against "a formidable combine" of the Shiv Sena and the BJP, and would have to stick together to repeat its earlier success.

On Rajasthan, there is no unanimity on a change and sections of the Congress leadership have sought to dismiss the Gehlot-bashing as part of an upper caste campaign. "Mr Gehlot has done good work despite the severe drought, but lacks PR," said one Congress office-bearer, not wishing to be identified.

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PARTY OPEN TO ALLIANCES

Congress buries 'soft Hindutva'

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, Jan. 5. — "Soft Hindutva" can never be an answer to Hindutva when it comes to taking on the BJP. The party has thrown a challenge to the Congress politically and ideologically by its "perverted interpretation of Hinduism which is being equated with Hindutva". This was the refrain of the political resolution adopted at an extended meeting of the Congress Working Committee today.

In her opening remarks, Mrs Sonia Gandhi said: "The party faces a number of ideological and political challenges."

On the ideological front, the Congress has buried the debate on whether to adopt a "soft Hindutva" approach to fight the BJP's brand of Hindutva. Three weeks after the Gujarat poll debacle, the party rejected the view that it had lost the polls because of the Hindutva factor. "Not at all," the Congress chief said as she came out of the meeting.

The CWC resolution said: "For the Congress, secularism is the battle to rescue India's religious traditions, teachings and practices from the forces of bigotry and hate."

The Congress' immediate challenges are the Assembly polls in four states next month, which were discussed in details at the meeting. The party's poll plank for the February elections is "economic growth with social harmony", Mr S Jaipal Reddy told reporters.

Hindutva was at the focus of discussion at the CWC meeting which coined words and phrases to condemn the BJP for "the varying

interpretations of Hindutva by the BJP and its affiliates which reveal a diabolical design to confuse the people. While rejecting any "soft approach" to Hindutva and reiterating its conviction in secularism, the Congress said it may adopt a new definition to make the word "secularism" less pronounced.

The CWC resolution said: "Hindu dharma has nothing to do with the narrow and bigoted Hindutva as propounded and propagated by the RSS, BJP and the VHP which distorts the very essence of our culture, values and legacy... the Congress would not let this go 'unchallenged'".

The BJP is misusing the great Hindu faith for narrow political purposes which could damage the country's unity and integrity. Also, the Congress does not recognise the claim of some other parties that they are "secular". Mrs Gandhi said: "The Congress is the only secular party with a

nationalwide base which can accommodate all social and religious groups". The party is "open" to alliances with like-minded parties and would not like secular votes to be split.

Looking forward to 2004 Lok Sabha elections, senior leaders such as Mr Arjun Singh, Mr Pranab Mukherjee and Dr Manmohan Singh hoped the party would be able to recover from the Gujarat shock and move ahead. Their hope is based on the fact that more than half of the people in Gujarat voted against the BJP and that its share of votes increased by 4 per cent compared to 1998.

In its resolution, the CWC mentioned cross-border terrorism, accusing the Centre of all-round failure in combating terrorism.

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