

NOT HOLDING THE FORT: After 39 years, this Military Police unit won't be reporting for duty at the Red Fort. On Monday the fort was handed over to the ASI.

Change of guard

- ▶ **Trooping out:** On Monday, Army vacates Red Fort. The British had turned the fort into a garrison after seizing it in 1857
- ▶ **New master:** Defence Minister hands over fort to ASI. Now the entire fort will be open to tourists. Earlier, the Army had occupied 80% of it
- ▶ **Emotional moment:** "Shifting out is an emotional thing, but national interest comes first," says Army Chief, General N.C. Vij
- ▶ **Demolition man:** Culture Minister Jagmohan proposes razing some more barracks inside the fort

Army marches out of Red Fort after 145 yrs

Vishal Thapar
New Delhi, December 22

THREE YEARS after terrorists attacked the Red Fort — that symbol of India's imperial and state power since 1648 — the Army on Monday cleared out of the fort, shedding the Mughal-era monument of some of its stately trappings.

Defence Minister George Fernandes ceremonially handed over the Red Fort to the Archaeological Survey of India, ending the Army's occupation of this

historic monument since 1857. This was done to facilitate restoration of the fort's grandeur and to open it up to tourists as a mirror to India's rich past. Over 80 per cent of the complex was with the Army.

An Army spokesman said it was "sheer coincidence" that the day coincided with the third anniversary of the attack by Lashkar-e-Tayyeba terrorists. The 4 Sikh Light Infantry battalion, which vacated the Red Fort on Monday, was also one of the first Indian Army units to have

occupied it after the British left in 1947.

After reviewing a guard of honour from the outgoing troops and presenting a memento with a ceremonial key to the ASI director, Fernandes admitted that letting go wasn't easy. "This is a very emotional moment for the Army. It has stayed here for an era. But the time has come for the Fort to be used for presenting a glimpse of India's history to the world," he said.

The Red Fort was turned into a military garrison after the Bri-

tish seized it following the First War of Independence in 1857. British-style barracks came up on both sides of the *naubat khana*. The Indian Army took over the Red Fort garrison after the power shift in 1947.

The Army manned the Lahore and Delhi Gates to the Red Fort. Limited access was provided to tourists in 18.71 of the 117.60-acre complex. Symbolically, the Red Fort became more than a postal address for the Indian Army.

"Shifting out is an emotional

thing, yes, but national interest comes first," shrugged Army Chief General N.C. Vij.

A plaque unveiled by Fernandes recorded the same sentiment for posterity: "...The Red Garrison...was vacated in the national interest...for reviving its old glory and presenting it as an epitome of rich Indian architecture and history".

Tourism Minister Jagmohan lavished praises on Fernandes and the Army for consenting to leave, describing it as a "historic decision" and promising

to work towards getting a world heritage monument status for the medieval fort.

Jagmohan proposes demolishing some of the barracks, but the Army has left an indelible mark, on the ramparts where it had ammunition rooms and elsewhere. For the moment, the barracks are desolate. Do Armymen individually feel a sense of loss? "No. Moving on is part of our lives," says Lt Colonel Rajeev Kumar, the second-in-command of the vacating battalion.

SC DISPOSES OF 80 PETITIONS

Court nod for PF-pension

Our Legal Correspondent

NEW DELHI, Nov. 11. — The Supreme Court (coram, Babu, Balakrishnan, JJ) today upheld the validity of the 1996 Government Pension Scheme that provides for setting aside a particular portion of an employee's provident fund for his pension.

"We uphold the validity of the scheme," the court said in its order disposing of 80 petitions filed by employees' unions challenging the scheme. The matter had been referred to the Supreme Court after various High Courts gave conflicting judgments on the issue.

The Employees' Provident Fund and Miscellaneous Provisions (Amendment) Act of 1996 had sought to merge the existing family pension scheme with the Provident Fund. Besides, it had provided for setting aside an amount equal to 8.33 per cent of an employee's basic and dearness allowance from the employer's contribution to the PF for providing him post-retirement pension. This amount would go to a Central pension fund. However, the employee's contribution would in no way be touched.

Under the scheme, a person would get a pension equivalent to the number of years a person has put in service multiplied by the last salary he has drawn and the whole divided by 70. So if he has completed 35 years of service, he will be entitled to half of his last salary.

However, the last salary drawn would

SALIENT FEATURES

- Validity of 1996 Government Pension Scheme upheld
- Scheme to provide for diverting a major part of employers' PF contribution to a central fund for payment of employees' pension
- Major portion of employers' contribution to be diverted to the Pension Fund
- Of the total contribution of the employer, an amount equivalent to 8.33 per cent of the basic and DA of the employee to be transferred every month to central fund

not in any case exceed Rs 5,000. As per the Government Pensions Scheme, the pensionable salary is calculated by taking the average salary drawn in the last 12 months of service before retirement. Several employees' and trade unions had challenged the scheme on the ground that it was just a pretext being adopted by the government to withhold an employee's provident fund.

As regards some particular organisations exempted from the scheme on the ground that they had better pension schemes for their employees, the court said it would examine the issue separately.

Almost all the employees unions across the country had challenged the government pension scheme on the ground that it was arbitrarily withholding money due to the employees after retirement on the pretext of paying pension.

9.2 Airports privatisation proposal before Cabinet

Srinjoy Chowdhury in New Delhi

Sept. 8. — A proposal to privatise Palam and Indra Gandhi International airports in the Capital, using foreign capital through a joint venture is before the Union Cabinet.

This multi-crore privatisation project will also apply to the airports in Mumbai — Sahar and Chhatrapati Shivaji. The Cabinet, which meets later this week, is expected to take a decision. The airports in Kolkata and Chennai could be up for grabs in the next phase which could be within a year, a senior civil aviation ministry official said.

The privatisation could involve selling off 76 per cent of the airport to a firm, perhaps a foreign one. The Airports Authority of India is likely to be a part of the joint venture scheme. Restructuring each airport — it would mean modernising them — could mean an investment of Rs 2,000 crore and after cabinet clearance, those with past experience are likely to be sought. This could mean getting a professional organisation that runs a leading international airport.

9/9
As the AAI is a financially successful organisation, the private firms, foreign or Indian, are likely to find it a profitable venture. The airports in both Mumbai and the Capital make a considerable amount of revenue — over Rs 500 crore per year and it is rising.

The official added that a 76 per cent chunk would be privatised as the bid would have to be “attractive” to the potential buyer. “I am confident that we will get a number of bids from foreign firms. If the terms are so negative, firms will not be interested in bidding,” he said.

As the AAI is a financially successful organisation, the private firms, foreign or Indian, are likely to find it a profitable venture. The airports in both Mumbai and the Capital make a considerable amount of revenue — over Rs 500 crore per year and it is rising. Despite the privatisation, air traffic control and security will stay in Indian government hands.

THE STATESMAN

9 SEP 2003

41 Kumbh pilgrims killed in stampede

TIMES NEWS NETWORK AND AGENCIES

Nashik: In one of the worst tragedies at a religious congregation in recent times, 41 pilgrims were killed and 150 others injured in a stampede and drowning on Wednesday as lakhs of devotees thronged the banks of the Godavari here for a holy bath during the ongoing Kumbh.

What caused the stampede—in a narrow lane close to Sardar Chowk, near Ramkund—is still unclear. While deputy chief minister Chhagan Bhujbal said the tragedy took place when pilgrims eager to have the holy bath first broke a barricade and surged forward, forcing several people to fall down, minister of state for home Kripashankar Singh said some people had bent down to get their footwear and were pushed from behind, leading to the stampede.

On the other hand, city police commissioner P.T. Lohar said some sadhus threw coins after their baths, and when pilgrims rushed to collect them, the stampede took place.

"I saw many people being crushed in front of my eyes," sobbed Suman Mhashinde, barely able to speak as she waited outside a hospital for injured relatives. "My 60-year-old mother-in-law was pushed and people stamped on her. She died on the spot."

The incident occurred at about noon. A majority of the deceased, mostly women and children, belonged to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, state administration sources said. The government has announced a compensation of Rs 2 lakhs for those killed and Rs 50,000 for those seriously wounded. Those with minor injuries will get Rs 10,000.

The tragedy took place during the

Tragedy at the mela



An injured woman who was hurt in the stampede at the Kumbh Mela is rushed to a hospital.

tensive arrangements made by the local administration," Mr Bhujbal said, adding that a magisterial inquiry had been ordered into the incident. He also said that the state government would make arrangements to send the bodies of those killed to their respective hometowns.

Chief minister Sushilkumar Shinde said the local administration was not to be blamed. No post-mortem would be conducted on the bodies, he added. "The inquiry will reveal the exact cause of the stampede," Union minister of state for home Swami Chinmayanand said, adding, "But the authorities could have managed the event better."

About 8,000 policemen, 3,500 home guards, 1,500 volunteers and 15,000 employees of the Nashik Municipal Corporation and the revenue department had been deployed to regulate the crowd. About 70,000 vehicles had entered the

city on Tuesday alone from different areas of the country.

As wailing ambulances carried the dead and injured away and rescuers scrambled to overcome the lack of stretchers, hundreds of thousands of other apparently unfazed pilgrims continued bathing at other points along the river.

About three million devotees had assembled on the banks of the Godavari for the mela, which is held every 12 years, coinciding with the sun and Jupiter's positions. August 27 was regarded as the most auspicious day for a dip in the holy river as the sun, moon, and Jupiter were together in the Leo constellation, which is a very rare occurrence.

But Wednesday also marked the day Mars passed closer to Earth than at any time in the past 60,000 years, which many astrologers around the world believe means disaster.

Staff part-funders in new pension plan

OUR CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Aug. 23: The cabinet today cleared a new contributory pension scheme for central government employees and announced the formation of a pension regulator to oversee the rise of a new breed of pension fund managers who will be allowed to funnel retirement funds into the stock markets.

The new pension fund for government employees will apply only to those who joined service after October 1, 2002, but will not apply to the armed forces. The new pension system is based on defined contribution, shared equally between the government and the employees.

The government devised the new scheme as it wanted to put a lid on its ballooning pension bill which is projected to rise to Rs 23,158 crore this year (excluding the pension payout of the telecom sector).

The employee and the government will each contribute 10 per cent of the monthly salary and dearness allowance towards the pension fund. The pension contributions and accumulation will be accorded tax preference up to a certain limit.

The scheme also provides the individual with an option to exit at or after the age of 60. However, when they exit the scheme, they will be mandatorily required to invest 40 per cent of their pension wealth to purchase an annuity from a life insurance company.

State governments will have

INVESTMENT OPTIONS

- **OPTION A:** 60% of assets to be placed in government paper (or gilts); 30% in investment grade corporate bonds; 10% in stock markets
- **OPTION B:** 40% of assets in gilts; 40% in corporate bonds; 20% in stock markets
- **OPTION C:** 25% of assets in gilts; 25% in corporate bonds; 50% in stock markets

GREY AREAS

- Many entities — fund managers and insurers — have been eager to enter pension fund business. One proposal was to have a state-owned pension fund manager (say UTI) and five private players. The pension regulator will eventually decide on number of entrants and entry barriers
- Although press note says "the individual will be free to allocate his money across any of these choices", not known if all three options will be offered
- If someone opts for the high-risk, high-return Option C, will they be able to change their option if the stock market plunges? Will they have to pay a fee for switching from one investment plan to another?

the option of offering the same scheme to their employees "as and when they decide the new system will be capable of accommodating the new participants".

The cabinet also approved the formation of an interim Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority on the lines of the capital market watchdog, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), and the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDA).

Sushma Swaraj, the Union minister of health and parliamentary affairs, told reporters after the cabinet meeting that the system will have a central record-keeping and accounting infrastructure and several pension fund managers to basically offer three categories of schemes.

The three options — under which varying fund proportions can be shovelled into the stocks, gilts and bond markets (See chart) — have been cleared in principle by the government but will be subject to regulatory restrictions and oversight by the pension regulator.

Individuals will be entitled to allocate their money according to their choice across any of these three options.

The pension fund managers will also be free to make investments in the international markets, though subject to regulatory restrictions.

The existing provisions of the gross provident fund would be withdrawn for those covered by the new pension scheme.

The interim pension regulator will be headed by a chairman

and have four other members who will function under the administrative control of the finance ministry.

While two members will serve full time, the remaining two will be part-time members selected by the central government. The members are required to have knowledge and experience in economics, finance, legal and administrative matters.

Private insurers were agog over the prospect of entering the lucrative pension fund business. Many felt that the three investment options given by the government were "safe and sound".

The roadmap for the restructured pension scheme for new central government employees was announced by former finance minister Yashwant Sinha in 2001.

In his budget speech in February this year, finance minister Jaswant Singh had said: "The new pension scheme will be portable, allowing transfer of the benefits in case of change of employment, and will go into 'individual pension accounts' with pension funds."

There was no word on this in today's press note on the subject issued after the cabinet meeting.

The Confederation of Central Government Employees and Workers condemned the decision to introduce a contributory pension scheme and threatened to go on strike if it was not withdrawn, adds PTI.

■ See Business Telegraph

ONGC chopper crashes, 21 missing

3 dead, 2 rescued; technical snag or pilot error may have led to mishap

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Mumbai: In one of the worst helicopter disasters in recent years, at least three persons were killed when a Russian-made Mi-172 helicopter operated by the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) crashed into the Arabian Sea off the coast of Mumbai on Monday at about 12:20 p.m.

The copter had been hired by ONGC from the privately-owned Mesco Airlines. A joint operation to trace the missing persons has been launched by the Indian navy, the coast guard and ONGC's vessels.

The helicopter was transporting 29 personnel, including four crew members, from the offshore Sagar Kiran oil rig to Mumbai. It was to make a stopover at the Sagar Jyoti oil rig en route. It crashed two minutes after take-off, 42 nautical miles south of the city. While the cause of the crash is not yet known, sources said either pilot error or bad weather or a combination of both could have been responsible. There is speculation in aviation circles that the chopper went down because of a technical problem.

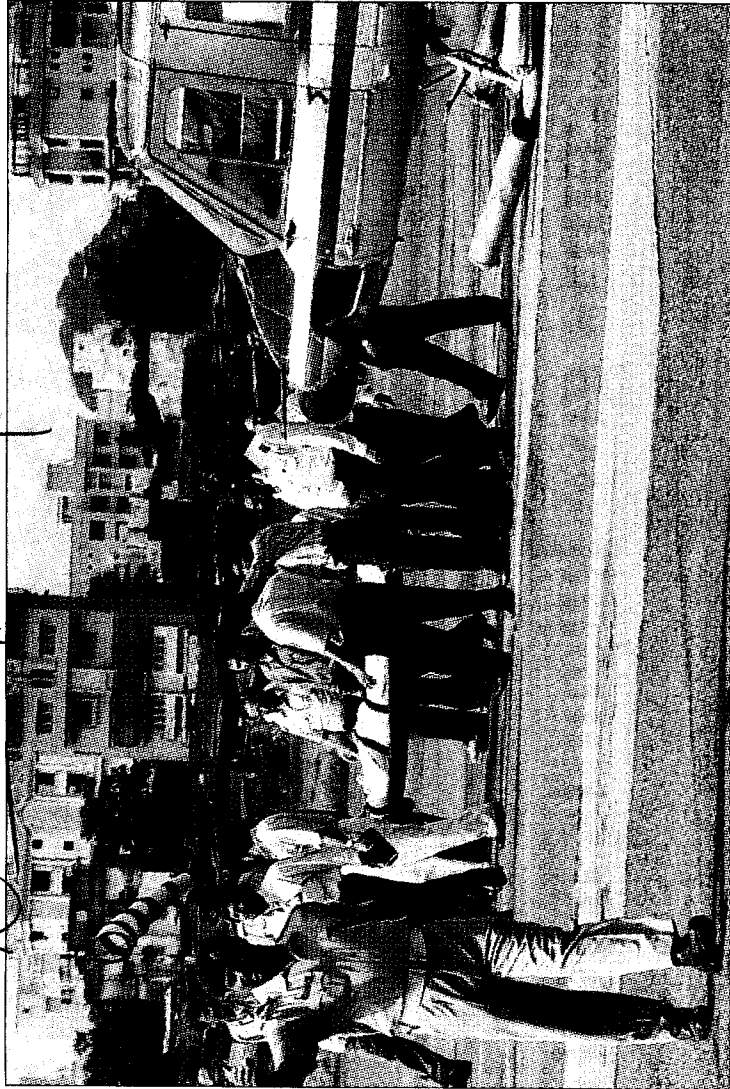
According to aviation sources, the helicopter was flying at an altitude of 150-200 feet above the sea and was travelling at a speed of 85-90 km per hour. Sources said the pilot must have had very little time to respond to the emergency since it was flying at a low alti-

tude. The helicopter's floats did not operate and it sank. The flying time between the two oil rigs is five minutes. Officials of the airline declined to comment. The chopper was manufactured in 1995 and its certificate of airworthiness was renewed in April 2003.

Petroleum minister Ram Naik told reporters at the Juhu heliport that the ministry would institute an inquiry into the safety of the helicopter operations of ONGC. Mr Naik made this announcement after agitated employees of ONGC gheraoed him on his arrival at the heliport, demanding suspension of the corporation's chairperson, Subir Raha.

The employees contended that helicopter operations—even those run by Pawan Hans—weren't totally safe. Mr Naik said that while the name of the person who would head the probe would be announced later, Mr Raha would certainly be questioned. The director-general of civil aviation would also probe the cause of the accident. Regarding suspension of Mr Raha, the minister said a decision could only be taken after completion of the inquiry.

The Indian navy and the coast guard pressed their vessels and helicopters into the search and rescue mission. By late afternoon, three bodies—of Capt Ravi Chandran and Capt Jaiswal (crew) and S. Dangle—were recovered by the coast guard.



The body of a victim is wheeled out from the ONGC heliport at Santacruz in Mumbai on Monday.

ONGC accidents • **March 12, 1998:** Gas platform B-121 in the Bombay High field caught fire after gas leaked from well B-121-D. Damage estimated to be Rs 210 cr approx.

• **Valentine's Day, 2001:** A fire raged on a platform 200 km west of Bombay High. Two persons died.

• **September 20, 2001:** A fire broke out in the Gandhar oilfields managed by ONGC. It raged for five hours and caused major disruption of supply.

Helicopter crashes • **September 22, 2002:** Three passengers and two captains died when a helicopter

making the trip from Amby Valley to Mumbai crashed near Lonavla. The copter had been chartered by the Sahara group from Million-Air.

• **26 May, 1997:** A Pawan Hans copter, evacuating an ONGC employee who was seriously injured, crashed in the Bombay High region, killing its two pilots.

• **Mi-172 helicopter** • A twin-engine helicopter with 26 passenger seats and twin engines—suitable for offshore and high-altitude operations.

• **Russian made;** Range-480 km; Endurance of 2.10 hours; Max weight—13,000 kg

Shriram Vernekar

12/8

9/11

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'CITIZENS CAN'T BE HELD TO RANSOM'

SF-1
7/8

SC strikes at 'right' to strike

90

Our Legal Correspondent

NEW DELHI, Aug. 6. — The Supreme Court (coram, Shah, Lakshmanan, JJ) today observed that government employees had no fundamental, statutory or equitable/moral right to go on a strike. "The law on this subject is well settled and it has been repeatedly held by this court that employees have no fundamental right to resort to strikes," the Bench said.

"Even a very liberal interpretation of Article 19(1)(C) cannot lead to the conclusion that trade unions have a guaranteed right to effective collective bargaining or to strike, either as part of collective bargaining or otherwise," the Bench observed. The court was disposing of a batch of petitions challenging the Tamil Nadu government's decision to sack about 1.76 lakh employees for striking work in July.

There's no statutory provision empowering employees to go on a strike. In this context, the court quoted Rules 22 and

Observations of the Bench

- There is no fundamental, legal/statutory right nor any moral or equitable justification to go on strike
- Government employees cannot claim that they can hold society to ransom
- Strike as a weapon is mostly misused resulting in chaos and maladministration
- For redressal of grievances, they have to approach statutory bodies created for the purpose
- Instead of going on strike, if the employees do some more work honestly, diligently and efficiently, such a gesture will not only be appreciated by the authority but also by the people

22A of the TN Government Servants Conduct Rules, 1973, which prohibit government staff from going on a strike. "Government employees cannot claim that they can hold society to ransom by going on a strike. Even in cases of injus-

tice, they have to resort to machinery provided under... statutory provisions..."

Strike as a weapon is mostly misused, resulting in chaos and total maladministration, the court noted. "It affects society... when two lakh employees go on strike en masse, the entire administration comes to a grinding halt."

The court agreed with the TN counsel, Mr KK Venugopal, that in a society where 90 per cent of the income from direct taxes was spent on salaries and where hundreds of qualified people were waiting for employment in government departments or in PSUs, strikes can't be justified.

The court observed that employees should not only be conscious of their rights but duties as well. It said misconduct by government employees was required to be dealt with in accordance with law. The reinstated (TN government) employees should take care in maintaining discipline.

CPM reaction, page 4

Airports to fly high on foreign wings

Nandini R Iyer in New Delhi

Aug. 1. — Airports in Delhi and Mumbai — IGI and Palam, and Sahar and Chhatrapati Shivaji — may soon look like those in London, Paris and Frankfurt. Companies running these European airports are likely to be key bidders if a civil aviation ministry proposal allowing majority stake for private, including foreign, parties in Indian airports gets Cabinet clearance.

Delhi and Mumbai airports, busiest and richest in India, will be the first to be put on the block. Kolkata's and Chennai's are next on the list. The ministry proposal envisages privatising the running of all airports eventually. But airport security and ATC will remain the government's responsibility.

Officials said the ministry had recommended separate joint ventures for each airport. Foreign or private domestic partners will have 76 per cent stake. There will be an initial equity participation by the Airports Authority of India. "Once Cabinet approval is received we'll invite expressions of interest," an official said. "Though there'll be about 10 or 12 interested parties. We believe the managements of London's Heathrow, Frankfurt airport and Charles de Gaulle and Orly in Paris will probably be the front runners."

For India the advantages are obvious. "We'll get world class airport terminals, the necessary investment of about Rs 2,000 crore and expertise for a job which we frankly don't have," said the official.

For the majority stake holder, the

incentives are "a lucrative business with good returns, a constantly increasing revenue, better flying slots and better liaison with local authorities". In 2001-02, the revenue earned from Delhi airports was Rs 590 crore and from Mumbai's Rs 670 crore.

"In India, airports are a cash cow (AAI records an annual revenue of Rs 2,200 crore) even in the state in which they are. With international standard airports, any investor will reap manifold returns on investment," the official said. "The security will continue to remain in control of CISF and ATC will remain with AAI. Ground handling will continue to be with individual airlines in the case of private domestic carriers and the two national carriers. In the case of foreign airlines, it will be handled by the national carriers."

2 AUG 2003

Old-age pension scheme launched

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, JULY 14. The Government today amended the old-age pension scheme at the launch function itself to permit premature withdrawal of the amount after 15 years.

Also, after three years, a pension policy-holder can avail of a loan from the Life Insurance Corporation to the extent of 75 per cent of the premium amount for which the interest would be 8.5 per cent per annum for now. The interest rate would be revised periodically.

These two amendments were announced by the Finance Minister, Jaswant Singh, just before the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, handed over policy documents to some of the beneficiaries.

Mr. Vajpayee also formally launched the universal health insurance scheme which would provide medical cover to specified beneficiaries.

The old-age pension scheme of the LIC, called the Varistha Pension Bima Yojana, will provide a minimum pension of Rs. 250 a month and a maximum of Rs. 2,000 a month to people over 55 years of age who opt for the scheme.

For the minimum pension, a lump sum payment of Rs. 33,335 has to be made while for the Rs. 2,000 scheme, Rs. 2,66,665 has to be paid (the figure has been revised downwards from the earlier amount of Rs. 2,77,490). There is no upper age limit for availing of the scheme and in the event of the death of the pensioner, the purchase price will be returned to the nominee.

The assured rate of return worked out by the LIC is nine per cent per annum. In case the LIC earns lower returns on the corpus of the scheme, the Government would step in to make up



The Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, presenting a policy to a senior citizen at the launch of a Special Pension and Health Insurance Scheme for Senior Citizens in New Delhi on Monday. The Finance Minister, Jaswant Singh, is also seen. — Photo: V.V. Krishnan

the shortfall.

The universal health insurance scheme, which would be community-based involving a minimum of 100 families, envisages a premium of Re. 1 a day for an individual, Rs. 1.50 a day for a family of five and Rs. 2 for a family of seven. Against this, medical cover of up to Rs. 30,000 towards hospitalisation would be provided and in case of death due to accident, compensation up to Rs. 25,000 would be given. Additionally, compensation due to loss of earning would be pro-

vided at the rate of Rs. 50 a day up to a maximum of 15 days.

For below the poverty line families, the Government will provide Rs. 100 per annum towards their annual premium.

During the launch ceremony, Mr. Vajpayee said the need for old-age pension came about because of the changed environment in the country. "Earlier we had families where the aged and the elderly were looked after by other family members. Today, because of economic reasons, this has become difficult and the

Government felt the need to step in with the old-age pension scheme," he said. Mr. Vajpayee said that the pension and the health insurance schemes were part of the Government's 'Antodaya' efforts of reaching out to the poorest of the poor. "Under Antodaya, we have made available foodgrain at very cheap prices. There is no shortage of food in the country. Even so, if there are reports of starvation deaths, it is because we could not reach out to them. The delivery system has to be strengthened."

Atal old-age lesson & pension

OUR CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, July 14: Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee today launched a pension policy for senior citizens — Varistha Pension Bima Yojna — with a reprimand to health minister Sushma Swaraj for saying old age is a curse.

"I am old, too," he said. "Sushmaji ne abhi kaha ki *budhapa ek bimari hai. Main ise nahin manta aur agar aisa hai to hum iska ant kar denge* (Sushmaji has just said old age is a disease. I don't think so and even if it is, we will have to end it)."

The pension plan — and its associated universal health plan — is a scheme Vajpayee had insisted finance minister Jaswant Singh should include in his budget speech as part of the measures to provide regular income to senior citizens in a fall-

ing interest rate regime and affordable medical treatment to the needy.

All citizens above 55 can subscribe to the pension plan, which provides a return of 9 per cent a year. While the minimum pension has been fixed at Rs 250 a month, the maximum monthly payment will not exceed Rs 2,000. The pension will start flowing from the month after the payment of the lump-sum deposit and will be taxable.

The pension plan, whose launch was mixed last month amid reports that the insurance regulator was unhappy with certain aspects, has been slightly recast to provide a few extra benefits.

| SENIOR SOPS | |
|-------------|-----------|
| *PAYMENT | **PENSION |
| 33,335 | 250 |
| 66,667 | 500 |
| 133,333 | 1000 |
| 266,665 | 2000 |

*One-time payment to enter the scheme
 **Pension per month
 All figures in rupees

For starters, the upper age limit for entry has been removed. Earlier, it had been capped at 79.

Second, it gives an exit option after 15 years. In such an event, the deposited amount will be returned to the policy holder.

Third, there is a provision for taking loans up to 75 per cent of the deposited amount after the policy has run for three years. The interest rate now announced is 10.5 per cent but can change.

The amount that is paid to join the scheme will be returned to the nominee in the event of the pensioner's death. Underscoring the importance of health insurance, Vajpay-

ee said: "Elections are contested in many nations on the issues of health and governments change on such sensitive matters."

"In India, too, health is an important issue... I am confident that officials of insurance companies and the health ministry will discharge their duties effectively and help the people."

The health insurance scheme is open only to families below the poverty line. It offers reimbursement of medical expenses up to Rs 30,000 towards hospitalisation to an individual who pays Re 1 a day. The premium for a family of five is Rs 1.50 a day and for a family of seven Rs 2.

Subscribers will also be eligible to cover for death due to accident up to Rs 25,000 and compensation due to loss of earning at the rate of Rs 50 a day up to a maximum of 15 days.

DRIVER HELD RESPONSIBLE; NAIDU SEEKS HIGH-LEVEL PROBE

18 killed as Golconda Express falls off bridge in Warangal

By S. Nagesh Kumar

WARANGAL, JULY 2. In a freak train accident, at least 18 persons were killed and 21 injured, some of them grievously, when the speeding engine of the Guntur-Secunderabad Golconda Express fell off a road under-bridge near the Warangal railway station in Andhra Pradesh on Wednesday.

Ten of the victims were passengers of the train while seven persons, including a woman, were crushed to death when the diesel engine hurtled down on to the road below. The South Central Railway authorities attributed the accident to brake-failure in the engine.

According to eyewitnesses, the train was approaching the station at a speed of 50-55 km an hour though it was scheduled to halt at Warangal. It was expected to slow down to a speed of 15 kmph at a signal one km before the railway station.

Even before the Station Master could react, the train sped past platform number two and rammed the sand hump at the end of the track, barely 300 metres from the station, at 10.25 a.m.

The engine smashed the barriers and fell off the bridge ahead, dragging along two passenger compartments and derauling two more.

The resulting impact was so great that nine passengers in the first and second coaches were instantaneously killed. The engine fell on an auto rickshaw and three persons in the vehicle, including the driver, were crushed to death. A scooterist and a fish vendor too suffered a similar end.

'Aghast at the speed'

K.L. Rao, who was waiting at the station to board the train, said he was aghast at the speed at which the train was whizzing past and feared an impending disaster.

He said some passengers



The engine of the Golconda Express hanging precariously after falling off a road underbridge near the Warangal railway station on Wednesday. — Photo: P.V. Sivakumar

jumped off the speeding train and one of them fell to his death.

Another eyewitness, Chandrasekhar Avadhani, an Inspector of Police in Mamnoor, said he was outside a bank near the under bridge, when he heard the sound of steel crashing into the road.

He alerted higher police officials and, with the help of local people, swung into action to save the passengers.

The cause of the mishap was a subject of controversy because the train had stopped without any problem at the Nekkonda railway station, 30

km away from here, at 10.12 a.m. Railway officials, who had earlier attributed the accident to brake failure, later changed their version and held the driver, Rasheed Jani, responsible.

The Warangal Superintendent of Police, Nalin Prabhat, said the driver and his assistant, who sustained minor injuries, ran away from the scene but returned later.

However, Jani refused to speak to the police and complained of chest pain.

The Chief Minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu, flew to Warangal from West Godavari and consoled the injured and fam-

ilies of those killed. Earlier, he visited the scene of the accident.

Mr. Naidu said he would speak to the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, on Friday requesting him to order a high-level inquiry into the accident. Pointing out that this was the third train tragedy in as many months in the State he said the Railways must fix responsibility and punish the guilty. "They cannot play with people's lives," he said.

Ex-gratia announced

Our New Delhi Special Correspondent reports:

The Railway Minister, Nitish Kumar, has announced an enhanced ex-gratia payment of Rs.1 lakh to the next of the kin of those killed in the train accident at Warangal.

Importantly, the ex-gratia payment would also be made to the next of the kin of the road users who died in the accident.

According to the official spokesman of the Railway Ministry, Mr. Kumar has similarly announced an enhanced ex-gratia payment of Rs. 25,000 for the grievously injured and Rs. 10,000 for those who receive minor injuries (both passenger and road users).

A MATTER OF CONVENIENCE ⁴⁹⁻¹⁰ 297

AS EXPECTED, THE appointment of R.K. Singh, as the new Chairman of the Railway Board, has created a row. At least 14 senior officers, including three Members of the Railway Board, have been superseded in the process. It is only the second time in recent years that a General Manager of a Zonal Railway is being directly appointed as Chairman of the Board, without any experience as a Member of the Board. Considering the controversy that it has generated, even before the formal appointment was made, the Railway Ministry has been forced to qualify its order with a clause "subject to the final outcome of the Original appeal filed in the Central Administrative Tribunal." But for one occasion when the then Railway Minister, A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhary, did virtually the same thing by bringing in a General Manager from the Eastern Railway as Chairman, superseding a host of seniors, this has not happened in recent years. Even during Nitish Kumar's tenure, when two Chairmen have been appointed, he did not think of invoking a vague, 1987 rule, which stipulates that officers to be considered for the posts of Board Members "should normally have a balance tenure of service of two years or more from the date of occurrence of the vacancy" and normally "have worked for a period of one year in the grade preceding that of Member, Railway Board" — which is that of a General Manager.

The question is: why has the Railway Ministry insisted on invoking this rule in the particular case of Mr. Singh? Where was the need to abandon the time-tested procedure of respecting seniority and that too by superseding 14 senior officers? Perhaps no Chairman in recent years has had a tenure of two years or more. It may be convenient for the Ministry to argue that the

special safety fund of Rs. 17,000 crores made available to the Railways must be utilised fully and a tenure of at least two years for the Chairman will help to prioritise, plan and implement the key features of this project. But the fact remains that the Railway Board maintains its own sense of direction and continuity to take care of these aspects, and functions only under the supervision and political direction provided by the Minister and his deputies. Under these circumstances, the insistence on the appointment of Mr. Singh, despite the clarifications and queries raised by the Cabinet Secretariat, certainly poses serious questions. If seniority is not a factor, what is that Mr. Singh brings with him that the others cannot? Is the two-year tenure more important?

In the light of these developments and the way ruling politicians can bend or use archaic rules to appoint their favourites, there is a case to free the Railway Board from the clutches of the Ministry. It may be time for the Centre to consider corporatising the Railways to make it a truly autonomous entity, so that it can take the right commercial decisions, while conforming to the Government's overall policy framework and functioning within the budgetary allocations. At a time when there is a growing demand for transparency in the decision-making process, it becomes imperative to lay down procedures for appointments to such top positions. Even if the Railway Board is a special entity and only its own technical officers can be considered for appointment, a process similar to that of the Public Enterprises Selection Board must be put in place to make these appointments above board.

IMA displays Niazi's revolver

DEHRA DUN, JUNE 30. The Indian Military Academy (IMA) today displayed before the media the revolver handed over by Lt. Gen. A.K.A. Niazi, during Pakistan's surrender in the 1971 war and said the security around the museum where it has been kept was being strengthened in view of the theft of a pistol from the National Museum in New Delhi last week.

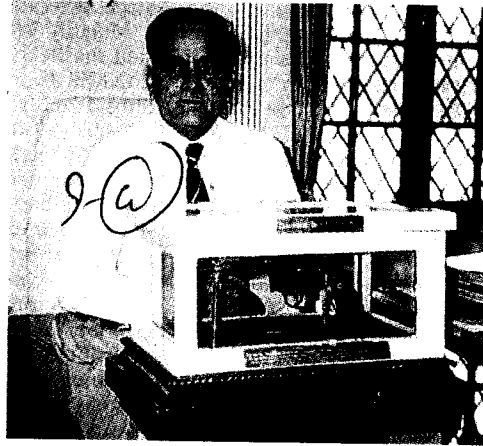
The pistol, which was earlier believed to have belonged to Lt. Gen. Niازی, went missing on Saturday from the Maritime Heritage Gallery.

The IMA Commandant, Lt. Gen. T.S. Shergill, displaying the revolver and photographs showing its surrender to Lt. Gen. J.S. Aurora, Army's Eastern Commander in Dhaka, said "the priceless symbol of our glorious victory was brought to the *alma mater* and presented to the then IMA Commandant, Lt. Gen. M. Thomas, on December 9, 1982 by Aurora during the golden jubilee celebrations."

The revolver, which came from the Eastern Command at Kolkotta where it was lying since the surrender ceremony, had been at the IMA museum here since then, he told reporters.

The weapon "has a very emotive value and is a source of inspiration for out cadets and future Army officers," Lt. Gen. Shergill said.

The IMA chief showed a photograph of the



The Indian Military Academy Commandant, Lt. Gen. T.S. Shergill, showing the revolver handed over by Lt. Gen. A.K.A. Niazi during Pakistan's surrender in 1971. — PTI

handing over of the weapon by Lt. Gen. Aurora to Lt. Gen. M. Thomas in 1982.

On the left side of the weapon is written "Lt. Gen. Niazi's personal weapon" and on the other "surrendered to Lt. Gen. Aurora PVSM, 1971". — PTI

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10/6

FUNDING AND MANAGING DISASTERS

A WORKING GROUP of the Crisis Management Group (CMG) has submitted its report to the Prime Minister. Headed by the former Defence Minister and NCP leader, Sharad Pawar, the group has taken a full two years to study the complex issues thrown up by major disasters such as the Gujarat earthquake. A full meeting of the CMG chaired by the Prime Minister will have to consider the report and make its final recommendations to the Government. On the face of it, the Rs. 500-crore corpus suggested to deal with major disasters is woefully inadequate. A task force headed by the Deputy Prime Minister is dealing with the problem of drought relief and there is already a raging controversy among the States on the routine allocation of funds by the Centre for the drought and flood relief demands. Of course, this too is managed on the basis of a calamity relief fund and a formula for the distribution of relief to the affected States. And yet, year after year, it is the same story. Last year, the Centre released a second instalment of Rs. 578 crores as its share from the Calamity Relief Fund (CRF) to the affected States, when they were claiming anywhere from Rs. 500 crores to Rs. 2,000 crores. The CMG can also evolve a more acceptable formula for assistance under the CRF, though it cannot be carried away by the exaggerated demands of the States.

In dealing with routine, annual disasters like those caused by floods and droughts for instance, it is unfortunate that some State Governments seem to suffer from lethargy and by the time they get into the action mode, it becomes too late for the people. And when there is a 'super cyclone' like the one that struck Orissa, the administration appears paralysed. What is lacking here is a preventive approach. With better coordination and weather forecast, a district administration must be empowered to take all preventive measures to save

lives and property before a cyclone strikes. An unfortunate scenario that parts of India witness, rather painfully every year, is floods in one State and acute drought in another. The linking of rivers to form a regional grid may be the ultimate solution to this peculiar problem and this massive project needs a push from all sides to get off the ground. The task force, headed by Suresh Prabhu, is doing its job now and the Centre as well as the States must work together to realise the fruits of such integration of natural and precious resources. There is need to build a regional coordination network so that foodgrains and other essential supplies can be rushed from the nearest centre, without getting bogged down with jurisdictional problems. At least in times of disaster, leaders must keep politics out of relief and learn to work together to help the victims.

The CMG and Mr. Pawar's working group must have also dealt with the more serious disasters like the earthquakes in Latur or the more recent one in Gujarat. Of course, aid for such occasions flows not only from within the country, but also from abroad. But the CMG should lay down a framework for managing such catastrophes. There has to be an apex body which can monitor and coordinate all efforts to bring early relief to the hapless victims and utilise every bit of the donations that pour in almost instantaneously. But, when the Centre takes such major disasters into account, a corpus of just Rs. 500 crores seems too insignificant to inspire any confidence. The CMG must evolve a disaster management drill, a mechanism that will immediately take over the coordination work and channel all the aid. The States too must be told to remain in a state of preparedness, identify the key departments and officials who will take charge and a control room that can closely monitor the developments.

THE HIND

10 JUN 2003

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SABOTAGE RULED OUT; NITISH ANNOUNCES EX GRATIA

36 killed in Frontier Mail fire

By Our Staff Correspondent

CHANDIGARH, MAY 15. At least 36 persons were killed and 13 injured when three coaches of the Amritsar-bound Frontier Mail from Mumbai caught fire early today. Unofficial sources put the toll at 38 dead and said 20 were injured. It all happened minutes after the train left the Ludhiana railway station.

Reports said that the fire broke out in the S-4 coach and spread to S-3 and S-5. But for the efforts of some armymen who not only pulled the chain to halt the train but also detached the affected coaches and dragged people out of the inferno, the toll could have been

ports said that nine of them were identified as Sangeeta Rani, Satya Pal and Vikram Singh, (from Meerut), Ashok Bhatia, Anil Kumar (posted with the BSF Jalandhar), Anil's wife Mishita, Padmavati, Ajit Kumar and Uday Bhaskar.

Reports said the fire was noticed around 3.45 a.m., near Ladhawal village.

Most of the victims were sleeping on the upper berths of the three-tier second class coaches.

The makeshift mortuary set up at the Civil hospital in Ludhiana was witness to heart-rending scenes as relatives sifted through the belongings of the victims to identify their loved ones whose bodies had charred beyond recognition. The Railway authorities have set up control rooms at Ambala (telephone: 2634653, 2631275), Saharanpur (2648453, 2610757, 2610175) and Jagadhari (238052, 239170) for information on the accident.

Railways personnel said that the intensity of the fire could be gauged from the fact the roof of coach S-4 had caved in and many metal poles had melted.

Senior officers of the State police and the Railway authorities at the accident site ruled out sabotage, though they stressed that the exact cause could only be identified by a detailed probe.

Traffic on the sector was resumed after some time and the three affected coaches were shifted to the railway yard at Ludhiana for forensic examination.

The Railway Minister, Nitish Kumar, the Punjab Governor, Justice (Retd.) O.P. Verma, the Chief Minister, Amarinder Singh, and other Ministers visited the site.

The accident is the second major fire-related tragedy for Ludhiana within a week. On May 10, a dozen persons lost their lives when a hosiery unit in the heart of the city was gutted.

PTI reports:

Describing as "unusual" the burning of three bogies of the Frontier Mail in a short time, the Railway Minister said the probe into the fire by the Commissioner of Railway Safety would be completed within one



Rescuers removing a body from the Frontier Mail that caught fire near Ludhiana on Wednesday. — AFP

month and the findings made public. Refusing to hazard a guess about the cause, Mr. Kumar said the aspects to be investigated would include the bogie, its door and electrical problems, if any.

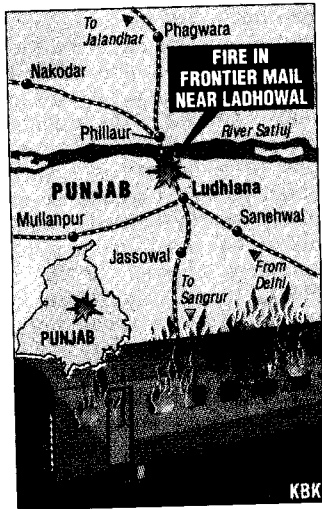
The survivors of the affected coaches would be interviewed to ascertain the cause of the ac-

cident, the Minister said. Asked whether the fire was caused by sabotage or any other reason such as the bursting of a stove or an electric short circuit, he said "we will have to wait for the inquiry".

To a question he said the toll was 36 as per the "skull count" but if police or civil administra-

tion officials put it at 38 the Railways would accept the figure.

The Railway Coach Factory at Kapurthala was designing a prototype of a coach to check fire from spreading, the Minister said adding that ex gratia of Rs. 1 lakh to the family of each dead, Rs. 15,000 to each seriously injured and Rs. 5,000 to each of the other injured would be paid. The Railway Claims Tribunal would provide all help to the



much higher.

According to preliminary reports and eyewitness accounts, most victims fainted choked as they were by the thick smoke. The luggage stacked at the entrance of the coaches also created hurdles to escape. About half a dozen persons who took refuge in the toilets hoping the flames would not reach them there perished.

The Chief Operational Manager (Northern Railways), L.R. Luthra, who was travelling in the train, took charge of the rescue and relief as it took at least 40 minutes for the first medical team to reach the site.

Fire-tenders had a tough time fighting the blaze as there was no major water source nearby.

Taking also the help of civilians, the authorities rushed the 13 critically injured passengers to hospitals in Ludhiana. Re-

38 die in Golden Temple Mail fire

Short circuit suspected, sabotage ruled out, survivors say TTEs of affected coaches were missing

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Majh Faggowal (Ludhiana): Thirty-eight passengers were charred to death and 14 injured after three coaches of the Mumbai-Amritsar 2903 Up Golden Temple Mail (earlier called Frontier Mail) caught fire at about 4 a.m. on Wednesday near Ladhawal, about 20 km from Ludhiana.

A short circuit is suspected to have caused the blaze but the theory is still to be verified. Railway and police authorities have, however, ruled out sabotage.

Many bodies were charred beyond recognition. Passengers' relatives had a hard time trying to identify the bodies with the help of personal belongings.

Chief operations manager, Northern Railway, L.R. Thapar, who was travelling in the train, told TNN that no explosion was heard before the fire was noticed in the S-4 coach soon after the train left Ludhiana station at 3.50 a.m.

The S-4 coach had two doors open while the other two were bolted shut when the incident occurred. The passengers took a long time to open the bolted doors. Thirty-four of the victims were reportedly travelling in this coach.

Most of the passengers from the connecting coaches, S-3 and S-5, managed to jump out on time. The train ticket examiners of all the three second-class reserved sleeper coaches were missing.

There were more indications about callousness and neglect of norms. Passengers on board the train told TNN that there were nearly 140 passengers in the affected S-4 coach. This was double its capacity.

Broken parts of a hookah and a stove top were visible in one of the coaches. Northern Railway general manager R.K. Singh said only an inquiry would reveal the whereabouts of the ticket examiners and whether the coach had been overcrowded.

Eyewitness accounts painted a terrible picture. People screamed, shouted for

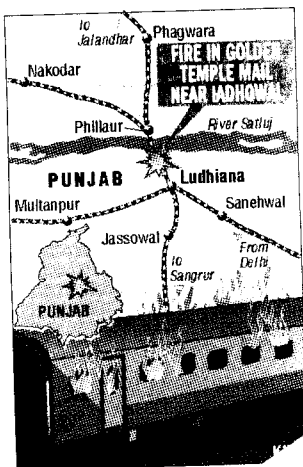
help and even flung their children from the burning bogies, while others pulled the emergency chains to halt the train. Joginder Lal of Amritsar, who was travelling with his wife in the S-4 coach from Delhi, said he was woken up by a sudden commotion, only to find a thick pall of smoke engulfing the entire coach. Although he managed to escape unhurt, he had failed to locate his wife until the time of going to press.

Another eyewitness, Amarjit Singh of Majh Faggowal village, who noticed the fire from his fields about 200 yards away, informed the villagers, who rushed to the spot and helped the passengers. Ludhiana police chief Harpreet Singh Sidhu said that forensic experts had been called from Chandigarh. The affected bogies were taken to Ludhiana railway station.

Swift action by the driver and guard of the train prevented the fire from spreading. The duo detached the burning coaches from the rest of the train as soon as it came to a halt near Ludhiana.

Driver Tirath Ram told reporters in Ludhiana that the train had left Ludhiana railway station at about 3.45 a.m. for its onward journey, but on reaching Ladhawal at 4 a.m., the chains were pulled. "I immediately applied the emergency brakes," he said.

● Nitish promises early probe, Page 5



Railway workers remove the charred bodies of passengers from the ill-fated train at Ladhawal station, 300 km north of New Delhi, on Thursday.

Choice of supplier comes with a price

Power law with power punch

OUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, May 5: The ground rules in the power sector have been redrawn. What this means is that soon — though no one is ready to say when — you will be able to go shopping for an electricity connection just as you do for a cellular service provider.

The government's ambitious intention to provide electricity to all by 2012 cleared the final legislative hurdle today when it was approved by Parliament, but there are a number of obstacles that lie ahead.

Reform lies at the core of the law, which should help cash-strapped state electricity boards clean up the financial mess they are in.

Besides the option to choose his power supplier, the customer stands to benefit — at least on paper — as he will be assured of steady, good quality power that won't wreck home appliances like fridges and ACs.

The bad news is that the law has bestowed enormous power in the hands of private electricity distribution companies. Section 135 provides that an assessing officer appointed by the company can "enter, inspect, break open and search any place or premises in which he has reason to believe that electricity has been, is being or is likely to be, used unauthorisedly". They can "search, seize and remove all

CROSS-CURRENTS

WHAT'S GOOD

- Customers can choose who to buy power from
- Guarantee of quality power
- Low to nil power cuts
- Connection within one month
- Compensation in 90 days for default in supply

WHAT'S BAD

- Assessing officer (appointed by supplier) may cut off your TV and fridge connection
- Search your house in your absence
- Inspect any document at home
- You have to explain why a meter other than that installed is in your possession
- If a penalty is slapped, you have to pay first and then appeal



such devices, instruments, wires and any other facilitator or article which has been, is being, or is likely to be, used for unauthorised use of electricity".

If power theft is detected, it will be assumed that you have been stealing power for at least three months and penalties slapped. In the case of industrial consumers, it will be assumed that the theft has been going on for at least six months. The onus of proof will be on the consumer to show that he hasn't been thieving for so long. The penalty is 1.5 times the tariff.

Observers pointed out that this clause can be misused by distribution companies that are

likely to employ hired thugs (credit-card companies and auto-loan agencies use them) to force consumers to pay.

The clause also empowers the assessing officer to examine any book of accounts or documents which "in his opinion" may be relevant to the action relating to default on payment of bills or any other offence.

A senior power ministry official said: "There are certain clauses that will ensure the effectiveness of reforms and develop the sector in an efficient way. Once the market matures, it will take care of these issues — any company that employs thugs or uses these clauses to unnecessarily harass the public may not get customers."

Power minister Ananth Gee-the called the Act a revolutionary step. It provides for the setting up of a central electricity authority, regulatory commissions and appellate tribunals, besides the promotion of an efficient and environmentally benign policy. In the Rajya Sabha, he said the law would help minimise losses from generation, transmission and distribution. There were minor hiccups when Left members sought 108 amendments to the Bill.

For rural areas, the Act suggests the novel concept of handing billing for power purchase and management of local distribution to panchayat institutions, user associations, co-operative societies, NGOs or franchisees.

10-1
28/1

Air India hardens stand, suspends 15 more pilots

By Arunkumar Bhatt

MUMBAI, APRIL 27. Promising to be harsh and tough, the Air India management today suspended 15 more pilots raising the total to 27 even as the Indian Pilots Guild prepared to move the High Court here to challenge the management. The airline has accused the pilots of using the SARS scare for demanding more remuneration. But the IPG maintains that it is only concerned with the risk of infection to its members and passengers.

The trouble began two days ago when the IPG directed its members not to operate the flights unless the management certified that the cabin crew on-board had not been to the SARS-affected sectors in the past ten days.

The AI spokesman, Jitendra Bhargav, who announced more suspensions said the action was taken under Clause 21 (1) (A) of the Certified Standing Orders in view of the pilots' refusal to operate flight.

The airline which is operating all its six flights bound for western Europe and the United States, has chalked out a contingency plan "to ensure stability of the flight schedule" assuming that the 'unionised' pilots are not on its rolls.

The new schedule not only uses the services of 159 executive pilots but also those of five pilots who retired 30 to 60 days ago but are medically fit and hold valid licences.

The spokesman said the Director-General of Civil Aviation had allowed the airline to increase the pilots' duty hours from nine to 10 hours. But this would not jeopardise the passenger safety for the pilots would get the prescribed rest hours.

The new schedule that would come into effect from tomorrow morning provides for 100 per cent maintenance of the West-bound flights to destinations such as London, Paris, New York, Newark and Chicago — using Boeing 747 aircraft for which

the executive pilots are licensed.

The majority of the agitating pilots fly Airbus 310 aircraft and their non-availability would reduce the flights to the Gulf and South East Asia to the extent of 25 per cent.

These passengers would be transferred to Indian Airlines wherever the sister airline is flying or to other airlines.

The airline will use all means of communication to inform the passengers about the changes. Details of the flight can be had by calling telephone no. 9892230010.

Govt. warning

Vinay Kumar reports from New Delhi:

Meanwhile, the Government has hardened its stance asking the pilots to withdraw their strike unconditionally and warned that action would be taken against all those who refuse to fly.

The Government is determined that the striking pilots withdraw their instructions unconditionally and resume flying," the Civil Aviation Secretary and chairman of the AI Board, K. Roy Paul, said here.

The Government had asked the IPG to withdraw its "unlawful, illogical and irrational" directive to its members, he said adding that the demands would be considered only after the pilots ended their strike.

Meanwhile, Indian Airlines has stepped in to lift stranded AI passengers in the Gulf sector by operating additional flights. India's domestic carrier is operating all its scheduled flights to SARS-hit Singapore from Delhi, Chennai and Bangalore.

On a request from AI, the domestic carrier operated an additional flight yesterday on the Delhi-Dubai-Delhi sector to clear the 14 stranded AI passengers.

Man tests positive for SARS in city

27/1

Virus makes first strike

ASTAFFREPORTER

Calcutta, April 26: The first Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) case in Calcutta was confirmed today after a 42-year-old man tested positive for the virus.

The blood report of Amitava Purakayastha of Madhyamgram, who has been isolated in a city hospital, arrived this evening from the Institute of Virology in Pune.

Purakayastha had recently returned from a tour of Southeast Asian countries and China, which are worst affected by the virus.

Director of health services Provakar Chatterjee confirmed the case. "Purakayastha arrived in the city on April 18. From the airport, he went straight home. After a few days, he developed acute chest pain and was admitted to a local nursing home," he said.

While in the nursing home, Purakayastha developed fever and began to show symptoms of SARS. "This prompted the nursing home authorities to send him to the Beliaghata Infectious Diseases Hospital," the health official added.

At the Beliaghata hospital, doctors concluded after a "thorough examination" that Purakayastha was not infected. But his blood samples were sent to Pune for testing. He passed the incubation period for the disease

(10-12 days) and was waiting for the report.

Two days ago, Purakayastha again had heart trouble and the Beliaghata hospital authorities offered to shift him either to SSKM or NRS hospital. "But Purakayastha's family members were reluctant," the health director said. The patient was then released on "risk bond".

Purakayastha's family got him admitted to the AMRI-Apollo Hospital at Dhakuria. His blood report from Pune came today, confirming SARS. The patient has been isolated on the fourth floor of AMRI, where the news has sparked panic.

"We have informed AMRI authorities about the measures to be taken," Chatterjee said.

The hospital CEO, Jose Verghese, declined to comment. He pointed out that Chatterjee had already spoken on the issue and he had "nothing to say".

Air-India strike

Air-India and its striking pilots dug in their heels today, signalling a bitter battle ahead over the SARS scare, adds our Mumbai correspondent.

The pilots, who have refused to fly till cabin crew who have flown to the Far East in the past 10 days are certified SARS-clear by the airline, met the management and the civil aviation secretary. But the impasse, which led to five cancellations yesterday and one today, continued.

At the end of the day, the airline suspended 12 pilots and sent showcause notices to 20 more. All striking pilots would face disciplinary action, promised spokesperson Jitendra Bhargava. The unfazed pilots said they would take legal recourse.

The Air-India management and civil aviation secretary K. Roy Paul had come to the crucial meeting with a one-line brief for the pilots, represented by Captain Kenneth Khan: take off now or get grounded.

They refused to budge. "Our demand (for the certificate) remains as it was," said Captain Vikrant Sansare, general secretary of the Indian Pilots' Guild that is spearheading the strike.

Air-India unveiled a contingency plan under which operations of Boeing 747-400, 747-300 and 747-200 would continue with about 160 executive pilots. However, 50 per cent of Airbus flights would be hit. The airline will operate 22 flights from midnight till 10 pm tomorrow. Several flights have been rescheduled.

The pilots' guild has sought an appointment with health minister Sushma Swaraj. "If we are satisfied with the health enforcement procedures to prevent SARS infection among the crew, we will consider withdrawal of our demand," Sansare said.

Indian Airlines has decided to shift night stops from Singapore to Bangkok from April 28 under pressure from pilots.

27 APR 2003

THE TELEGRAPH

Virus strike grounds flights

OUR BUREAU

April 25: The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) scare hit outbound flights, with Air-India being forced to ground five flights today and staring at the prospect of three cancellations a day.

The airline's pilots have refused to fly without "certificates" from the management clearing cabin crew. Members of the powerful Indian Pilots' Guild want details of flights to virus-hit Hong Kong and Singapore in the last 10 days with the names and medical status of the cabin crew on duty.

But they insist they are not on strike, which is how Air-India has labelled the agitation. "We are not on strike," said guild treasurer Mahesh Gulbani. "But why should they (the management) deliberately deny us this information?"

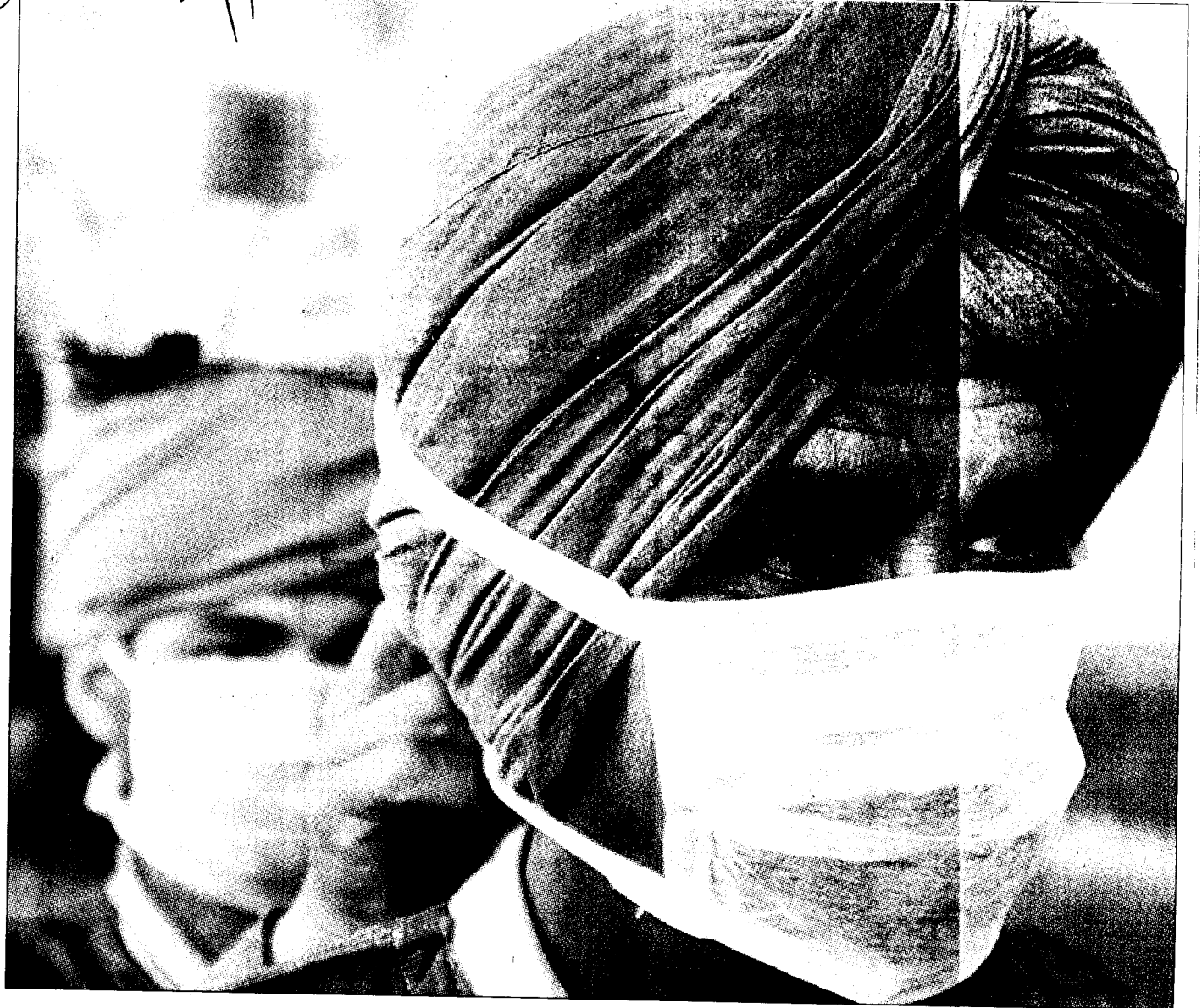
Strike or not, flight schedules have gone haywire. Five flights — Mumbai-Dubai, Mumbai-Delhi-London, Mumbai-Delhi-Hong Kong, Mumbai-Chennai-Singapore and Mumbai-Kuwait — had to be cancelled. As part of the domino effect, flights to the US via London and Paris are running behind schedule.

No other global airline has grounded flights because of SARS fears, although there have been cancellations on account of a drop in the number of travellers.

Only five SARS cases have been confirmed in the country so far, out of which one patient has been cured. The fifth case was reported today, when an uncle of Stanley D'Silva — one of the three patients in Pune — tested positive.

Air-India spokesperson Jitendra Bhargava said: "If talks fail, we will face a 50 per cent shortage on Airbus flights which means we will cancel three flights a day."

The airline has drawn up a contingency plan by getting executive pilots, who are not part of the guild, to fill in for the strik-



Porters wear masks at Amritsar railway station. (Reuters)

ers. But while it has a large number of trained executive pilots for its 425-seater jumbos (Boeing 747s), it does not have enough for its 200-seater Airbus 310s.

The striking pilots will meet the civil aviation secretary tomorrow, minister Shahnawaz Hussain said. "We will wait and watch the situation," he added. The secretary, K. Roy Paul, is also part-time chairman of Air-India.

The airline got a taste of what

is in store if the talks fail, when passengers on a hopping flight from UAE to Muscat via Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram cornered an official in an aircraft after the flight was delayed at Kochi.

But the government-run airline is unwilling to give in to the pilots' demand. "Today they want us to certify crew, tomorrow they will demand one for passengers and the next day for

hotel workers who serve them. This is not on," said Bhargava.

About 200 million passengers have flown since the SARS epidemic surfaced, he pointed out. "But there have been less than five cases of SARS patients who contracted the virus on board an aircraft. That, statistically speaking, is as good as none," the spokesperson said.

The pilots' guild says the certificates are being made avail-

able by aviation authorities in Hong Kong and Singapore. It adds that it has not been "convincingly assured about the health of two Air-India pilots".

Calcutta cautious

At the international airport in Calcutta, the arrival and departure lounges have been sprayed with an anti-viral mixture. Some immigration and customs officials have begun to wear masks.

26 APR 2003

THE TELEGRAPH

Truckers turn down Govt. appeal

By Our Special Correspondent
NEW DELHI, APRIL 20. Even as reports of shortages and rising prices of essential commodities grow, the truckers' unions have turned down an appeal by the Government to end their week-long strike while agreeing to consider seven of their 10 demands. This includes non-imposition of value added tax (VAT) on the transport sector.

The All-India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC) is, however, not prepared to accept the proposal for calling off the strike before holding talks and plans to go on a "silent dharna" tomorrow in the capital. Simultaneously, it denied reports that the truckers' unions in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh had called off the strike.

The AIMTC secretary-general, J.M. Saxena, told *The Hindu* that the only concession made in Andhra Pradesh was to allow the movement of poultry and eggs within the State following an appeal by the Chief Minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu. In Orissa, one of the 32 unions had withdrawn from the strike.

Mr. Saxena said that as for the letter from

the Surface Transport Ministry, he said the proposal was to call off the strike and then hold talks. This was unacceptable to them. A reply would be sent turning down the proposal. Besides, the Ministry offered concessions in areas over which it had little control such as VAT where the States had to take the decision. "Delhi and Uttar Pradesh have already decided to include the transport sector for the imposition of VAT," he said. The centre said that it would repeal the ban on the plying of 15-year-old vehicles but this meant overruling a Supreme Court order.

The Ministry letter says that since there was "no conflict" on most of the demands raised by AIMTC, the Surface Transport Minister, B.C. Khanduri, had requested that the strike be called off. "This will enable us to have a more meaningful discussion," the official communication states.

The Government, however, sought to clarify its position in an advertisement published in leading newspapers today outlining the factual position on each of the truckers' 10 demands. Regarding VAT, it clarified that transport was a services sector

and VAT did not apply to services. On another crucial issue relating to a reduction in diesel prices, it said that withdrawal of the proposed 50 paise cess on diesel was not possible as it was for the development of roads. "It is a national effort to raise resources for the development of roads in the country," the Ministry said.

As for stability in diesel prices, it said the Petroleum Ministry was willing to consider this as long as variations in the international market did not exceed 25 paise a litre.

Meanwhile, consumers continued to suffer as the countrywide strike is leading to rising prices of fruits and vegetables in many States. The strike led by the AIMTC, the largest truckers' union, has so far excluded essential items such as milk and LPG.

Supplies may be affected even further in the capital as tempos and small lorries joined in the strike on Saturday.

Estimates vary about the losses to trade and industry but these are being pegged at thousands of crores while the transport industry is estimated to be suffering losses of up to Rs. 500 crore daily.

THE HINDU

2 1 APR 2003

Truckers turn down Govt. appeal

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, APRIL 20. Even as reports of shortages and rising prices of essential commodities grow, the truckers' unions have turned down an appeal by the Government to end their week-long strike while agreeing to consider seven of their 10 demands. This includes non-imposition of value added tax (VAT) on the transport sector.

The All-India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC) is, however, not prepared to accept the proposal for calling off the strike before holding talks and plans to go on a "silent dharna" tomorrow in the capital. Simultaneously, it denied reports that the truckers' unions in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh had called off the strike.

The AIMTC, secretary-general, J.M. Saxena, told *The Hindu* that the only concession made in Andhra Pradesh was to allow the movement of poultry and eggs within the State following an appeal by the Chief Minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu. In Orissa, only one of the 32 unions had withdrawn from the strike.

Mr. Saxena said that as for the letter from

the Surface Transport Ministry, he said the proposal was to call off the strike and then hold talks. This was unacceptable to them. A reply would be sent turning down the proposal. Besides, the Ministry offered concessions in areas over which it had little control such as VAT where the States had to take the decision. "Delhi and Uttar Pradesh have already decided to include the transport sector for the imposition of VAT," he said. The centre said that it would repeal the ban on the plying of 15-year-old vehicles but this meant overruling a Supreme Court order.

The Ministry letter says that since there was "no conflict" on most of the demands raised by AIMTC, the Surface Transport Minister, B.C. Khanduri, had requested that the strike be called off. "This will enable us to have a more meaningful discussion," the official communication states.

The Government, however, sought to clarify its position in an advertisement published in leading newspapers today outlining the factual position on each of the truckers' 10 demands. Regarding VAT, it clarified that transport was a services sector

and VAT did not apply to services. On another crucial issue relating to a reduction in diesel prices, it said that withdrawal of the proposed 50 paise cess on diesel was not possible as it was for the development of roads. "It is a national effort to raise resources for the development of roads in the country," the Ministry said.

As for stability in diesel prices, it said the Petroleum Ministry was willing to consider this as long as variations in the international market did exceed 25 paise a litre.

Meanwhile, consumers continued to suffer as the countrywide strike is leading to rising prices of fruits and vegetables in many States. The strike led by the AIMTC, the largest truckers' union, has so far excluded essential items such as milk and LPG.

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Estimates vary about the losses to trade and industry but these are being pegged at thousands of crores while the transport industry is estimated to be suffering losses of up to Rs. 500 crore daily.

Deadlock in talks with truckers continues

By P.K. Bhardwaj

NEW DELHI, APRIL 19. While the indefinite strike by the truckers entered the sixth day today, there was hardly any forward movement towards breaking the deadlock following the failure of their talks with the Road Transport and Highways Minister, B.C. Khanduri, on Wednesday.

And as the strike seemingly is getting further prolonged with all its adverse implications for the common man and the economy, the patience of the common man as also the industry apparently is running out. They want the Government to do something to bring the strike to an end. No wonder there were some appeals for an early settlement of the issues as the movement of goods within the country and from the ports have been crippled besides the prices of essential commodities further shooting up. Even the striking truckers are learnt to be getting restive.

Indications emanating from the All India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC) which is leading the strike were that earliest the dialogue between the truckers and the Government could be resumed would be on Monday. To prepare ground for the dialogue, Mr. Khanduri is learnt to have been talking to the Chief Ministers in relations to the demands of the truckers falling within the purview of States.

Dropping hints about a possible meeting in the beginning of the coming week, the AIMTC general secretary, B.M. Saksena, said, "we expect the talks with the Government to resume on Monday". Following a request from the Government, AIMTC had agreed to defer further by a day blockage of goods such as milk and LPG cylinders, he said.

Later in the evening, countering rumours about development of serious differences among the striking truckers, he accused the Government of trying to break the strike and announced a

dharna by the truckers at Jantar Mantar here on Monday. If the issues are not resolved, the situation might get worse with the tempos and other small cargo vehicles ready to join the truckers' strike which might find an echo in Parliament when it resumes its session from Monday after a 10-day break.

Meanwhile, in what is seen as a setback of sorts for the striking truckers, the All India Confederation of Goods Vehicle Owners' Association (ACOGOA), which had extended tacit support for the strike, accused AIMTC leadership of not being able to handle the situation in an appropriate manner. It demanded a review of the situation in view of the "frustrating developments" of the past few days.

Airing its differences publicly, ACOGOA said it supported the strike with the understanding that it was to espouse the cause of truck owners who were the most harassed, misunderstood, looked down upon and exploited segment of the road transport sector.

In a statement, it listed separately the demands of the truck owners relating to diesel price, consignors sharing the highway toll with the truck owners, insurance companies providing third party cover to truckers and overloading being curbed effectively in accordance with the law.

Pointing to the damage being caused to the economy by the strike, CII appealed to AIMTC to restore services immediately as the public is at great inconvenience. It urged both the Government and AIMTC to come to the discussion table and work towards an amicable solution without any compromise on the reform process. It would be in the interest of everyone and above all nation, it said.

Lending support to the truckers, the Sarv Jati Shiromani Akali Dal demanded that the Government take the strike seriously and make efforts to redress their legitimate grievances.

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THE HINDU

Truckers to move essential goods for one more day

By P. K. Bhardwaj

NEW DELHI, APRIL 18. An immediate end to the truckers' strike was nowhere in sight as the strike entered its fifth day today. However, the possibility of a solution being found in the next couple of days cannot be ruled out.

Significantly in a conciliatory development, the Friday mid-night deadline set by truckers for rescinding exemption for essential commodities such as vegetables, fruits, milk, gas and perishable goods from the purview of the strike was extended by 24 hours this evening.

The truckers had earlier during the day appeared determined to intensify the agitation by withdrawing the exemption in the wake of failure of the first round of talks with the Union Minister of State for Road Transport and Highways, B. C. Khanduri, yesterday.

Though both the Government and the All-India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC), which is spearheading the agitation, did say that the talks would continue, there was no word on when the negotiations would be resumed. There had been no fresh contact between

the Government and the truckers. This was attributed to the fact that both the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and Mr. Khanduri were away on a visit to Jammu and Kashmir.

Delegation meets Naidu

One more positive development was a meeting at Hyderabad between AIMTC president, B. N. Dhumal, and the Andhra Chief Minister, Chandrababu Naidu, with the latter promising to use his good offices to facilitate a settlement. The AIMTC has also met the Union Labour Minister, S. S. Verma, to seek his help in finding a solution.

The AIMTC general secretary, J. M. Saxena, was not very aggressive in his pronouncements today as he talked in terms of his organisation being keen on finding a solution to their problems through negotiations. Besides, the BJP general secretary, Pramod Mahajan, had taken up the demands of the truckers with the Prime Minister yesterday.

Indications are that an intervention by the Prime Minister, whom the AIMTC leaders are keen to meet, might pave the way for an early end. The desire

for such a meeting with the Prime Minister was expressed by the AIMTC leadership yesterday. The possibility of a second round of discussions with Mr. Khanduri and a meeting with the Petroleum Minister preceding their possible interface with the Prime Minister have not been ruled out. The AIMTC had on Thursday suggested a meeting of all the Chief Ministers of the States and the Central Ministers dealing with issues raised in the 10-point charter of demands to sort out matters. But the talks ended in a deadlock.

Meanwhile, prices of vegetable, fruits and other perishable items continued to rise as a result of dislocation of their movement to the wholesale markets.

PTI, UNI report:

The Karnataka Government has made contingency plans to move essential commodities while the Transporters and Drivers' Council, Manipur, has threatened to take all vehicles, including buses and trucks, off the roads from Monday if their demands are not met. Transporters in Bihar, who have so far kept off the strike, will join the agitation on April 21.

STRIKE TO BE INTENSIFIED; MAHAJAN BRIEFS PM

Talks with truckers fail

By P.K. Bhardwaj

NEW DELHI, APRIL 17. The chances of an early end to the nationwide truckers strike were dashed following the failure of the talks between the Government and a delegation of the All-India Motor Transport Congress today.

At the crucial meeting between the truckers' delegation and the Union Minister of State for Road Transport and Highway, B.C. Khanduri, lasting an hour, the AIMTC chief, B.N. Dhumal, said the talks had failed and the strike was continuing.

"Our talks with Mr. Khanduri did not make much headway. The Minister did not give any assurance on any of our 10 demands and so we will continue the indefinite nationwide strike till our demands are met," Mr. Dhumal told reporters. However, there were indications of another round of talks in the near future.

The strike, which entered the fourth day today, has already seen a surge in the prices of fruits and vegetables in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Punjab, Chandigarh and Karnataka. There have also been reports of marginal disruption in the supply of petroleum products in some States.

It is feared that the situation might worsen in case the truckers carry out their threat to enlarge the scope of the agitation and refuse to lift even essential items from April 19, a deadline announced for resolving the issues raised by them. For the present, essential items including milk fall in the category of

goods exempt from the strike.

Mr. Dhumal said their demands, which include putting an end to frequent hikes in diesel prices, immunity from a planned value added tax, repeal of an order to scrap 15-year-old trucks and fixing of minimum freight rates, also concerned the Union Finance and Petroleum Ministries and the States and a resolution could only be found if a meeting of all these parties was called immediately.

Mr. Khanduri did not comment on the outcome of the parleys, but said the talks would continue. Neither the Minister nor Mr. Dhumal indicated any timeframe for the second round

of talks.

The AIMTC president said he requested a meeting with the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, to explain the "harassment" by the State Governments in the name of toll and entry tax.

"Only a meeting with the Prime Minister where all the Chief Ministers, the Union Finance and Petroleum Ministers are called, could find a solution to the problems the truckers are facing," Mr. Dhumal said. The AIMTC secretary-general, J.M. Saksena, said "there was no commitment from either side. In the absence of any commitment, we have decided not to

withdraw the strike."

The AIMTC office-bearers said that though truckers were not covered under the proposed Value Added Tax (VAT) regime, Delhi, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh were using certain VAT provisions to levy entry tax.

Stating that Mr. Khanduri offered the truckers only "lollypops" and no assurances, they said the striking truckers had already met the BJP general-secretary, Pramod Mahajan, on the issue. In a related development, Mr. Mahajan met the Prime Minister and discussed the demands of the truckers.



Truck-owners shouting slogans after meeting the Union Minister of State for Transport, B.C. Khanduri, in New Delhi on Thursday. — PTI

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THE HINDI

STRIKE TO BE INTENSIFIED; MAHAJAN BRIEFS PM

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18 APR 2003

THE HINDU

Shunting the blame

5/18/14 White paper casts no light

It would be unfair to suggest that the White Paper on railway safety presented to Parliament is an attempt to whitewash causes underlying frequent accidents that have aroused serious concern. It would, however, be fair to conclude that the document reveals little that is new, and hence even less that is reassuring. The factors to which attention has been drawn have been trotted out in the past: backlog in renewal of track and rolling stock, distressed bridges, decline in work culture, shortage of funds for a thorough overhaul and modernisation of infrastructure. A wealth of statistical detail has been presented to create two impressions — that safety standards are comparable with other major systems, that the shortcomings are being progressively remedied. Neither sticks. Having made much of presenting the paper, the railways appear satisfied with the fact of its publication. Just like the new trains announced with the presentation of every railway budget, catering to political demands rather than meeting the needs of those who pay for their travel.

A couple of points are, however, well taken. The comparison between military and railway personnel is not far-fetched. The paper suggests that railway personnel be “insulated” against irresponsible trade unionism and the like, which is worth considering. It also refers to morale but is silent on that important aspect of military functioning — quality leadership. The other important point made is that the railways do not get adequate back-up from the states. Protecting the track, preventing its being encroached upon and better traffic management near level-crossings are areas in which the local administration fails to do its bit. State governments perceive the railways (and much else to be sure) as central rather than national assets. As far as that long dark tunnel is concerned, there is none of the proverbial light at the end of it now visible.

18 APR 2003

THE STATESMAN

Truckers continue to stay off roads

19A
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Mumbai: About 500,000 trucks, tempos and tankers in Maharashtra stayed clear off the road on Monday with transporters joining an indefinite all-India strike.

A nationwide strike has been called by the All India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC) to protest against the hike in diesel prices, varying rates of road tax, and an order of the Bombay high court directing that vehicles older than 15 years be scrapped.

Local transporters have been on strike since March 31 midnight to focus attention on the high court order. "We cannot afford to buy new vehicles which cost more than Rs 12 lakhs each," said Noshir Khodaiji, who owns a fleet of 12 buses.

Buses apart, the AIMTC has handed in a ten-point charter of demands to the authorities.

The main demands include a uniform road tax, abolition of toll tax and keeping truckers out of the purview of VAT (value-added tax) which will "impose hardships on them". Other demands include a rollback of excise duty on truck chassis, and amendments to the Carriers Act, 1865 to make it compulsory for goods to be insured.

"We cannot be held responsible if pilferage takes place along the route," pointed out president of the Bombay

Goods Transport Association Raman Khosla.

He said those vehicles which carry essential commodities had been exempted from the strike.

"The strike will go on until all our demands are conceded. This is our only recourse to call attention to our plight. We had a three-hour meeting at Masjid Bunder where AIMTC president Baba Dhurnal and all truck owners were vociferous in continuing with the strike," Mr Khosla said.

The Bombay Bus Owners' Association (BBOA), which represents 250 bus operators in the city, expressed solidarity with the truckers.

"But we have promised the schools that their examinations will not be disrupted and that is why some of the bus owners pay a fine of Rs 500 for each bus and carry the children to their schools," a spokesperson said.

Lemes D'Souza, secretary of the Bus Owners Sangh, which is a branch of the BBOA, said even conversion of the old fume-emitting engines to compressed natural gas (CNG) or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) engines was difficult. "Such engines must be approved by the Automotive Research Institute and are not easily available in the city. Besides, such engines cannot take a heavy load and so we find it difficult to change to them," he added.

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THE TIMES OF INDIA

Prime Minister convenes unscheduled meeting of allies to discuss strategy for general elections

Sonia show sends Vajpayee's team to the backroom



HERE I AM: Sonia at the rally. (AFP)

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, March 30: Sonia Gandhi's serial appearances on the political centre-stage have sent the stars of the BJP-led coalition back to the rehearsal room.

A few hours after Sonia this morning addressed a huge rally that outshone the NDA government's five-year jamboree yesterday, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee convened an unscheduled meeting of the bigger components of the coalition. The meeting that went on for several hours is being seen as a pre-election strategy session that discussed ways to blunt the perceived advantage of Sonia after the BJP's poor performance in the recent round of Assembly polls.

The political temperature is expected to rise in the coming days with elections to several key states scheduled for the end of this year and the general elections next year. Sonia, who had set her political roadshow rolling on Friday by convening a maiden session of the Congress' leaders, today virtually launched the campaign for Election 2004. (See Page 6)

At the NDA meeting at Vajpayee's residence, apart from the Prime Minister, deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani, NDA convenor George Fernandes, BJP president M. Venkaiah Naidu, finance minister Jaswant Singh, law minister Arun Jaitley, parliamentary affairs minister Sushma SwaraJ and BJP general secretaries Pramod Mahajan and Rajnath Singh were present. The allies were represented by Trinamul Congress' Mamata Banerjee, Janata Dal (United) president Sharad Yadav, Haryana chief minister Om Prakash Chautala, DMK leader T.R. Baalu and

railway minister Nitish Kumar. The Prime Minister told the leaders to identify issues concerning people and harness the government's achievements to the electorate. The allies were also asked to sink differences.

Development and the need to project a positive image dominated the agenda of the meeting, which began at 11 am and continued till 5 pm. "We want a larger mandate from the people than what we got last time. Development will be our main issue," the BJP president said. Mahajan, who was dropped as information and technology minister in the last reshuffle, expressed unhappiness about the NDA's failure to project the government's achievements.

The unusual length of the meeting fuelled speculation that the Centre is considering a proposal to advance the general elections to January 2004.

The BJP leadership has already initiated a process of consultation with the allies. Vajpayee had a round of talks with Telugu Desam chief Chandrababu Naidu in Delhi last month. Naidu is understood to have suggested advancing the general elections as he does not want simultaneous Lok Sabha and Assembly polls. The Andhra Assembly polls are due in October-November 2004. Seven major allies were invited to today's session. The rest will be called in the next round.

The issues that were raised today also reflected the allies' concern to address "vote-sensitive" areas. Mamata wanted disinvestment to be stopped and she raised the VAT issue, over which traders — considered a votebank of the BJP — have called a strike. Defending the Centre, the finance minister said it was up to the states to implement it.

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Opposition for rollback of fertilizer prices

413 By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, MARCH. 3. The Government is under intense pressure from its allies and the Opposition alike to roll back the prices of diesel and fertilizer. While the entire Opposition today walked out of the Lok Sabha, the Government's allies such as the TDP, the DMK and the Samata Party lent their support to the demand.

The main thrust of the argument of those in favour of a rollback was that the Government decision would subject farmers to greater problems. "They are already reeling under the onslaught of drought and floods. This is a burden they cannot bear," said Jagmeet Singh Barar (Cong.).

The issue was raised by Ramji Lal Suman of the SP who charged the Government with being insensitive to the needs of farmers. "This is something that will hit the farmers hard throughout the country," he said. He was supported by Ragh-

unath Jha (Samata) Priyaranjan Dasmunsi (Cong.) and Raghuvansh Prasad (RJD).

Mr. Jha accused the Government of targeting farmers. "My party will never support such a measure."

Other NDA allies such as the TDP and the Shiv Sena were also quick to voice their disapproval. Yerran Naidu (TDP) said farmers were the backbone of the country and this measure would have its impact on the economy as well. He was supported by Gingee Ramachandran (DMK). The rollback demand was also supported by Pandian of the AIADMK. The Opposition members led by Mr. Dasmunshi accused the NDA allies of paying "lip-service" to the cause of farmers. "If you are really concerned about the plight of the farmers, please announce that you will withdraw support if the Government does not withdraw the price increase," he said.

BJP to approach Minister: Page 11

4 MAR 2008

HINDU

A NEW RAILWAY ZONE

AN EMOTIONAL CAMPAIGN in support of a new railway zonal headquarters has ended with the Prime Minister, A. B. Vajpayee, laying the foundation stone for the South Western Railway zone at Hubli. The BJP was the biggest backer of the demand for carving out the new zone and that it be headquartered at Hubli. Mr. Vajpayee's participation only highlighted the emotional overtones which the issue took over the last four years in northern Karnataka. The impact of the move — in deference to regional sentiments — on the financial and operational health of the Railways would be severe, as forewarned by expert committees and the Government's own studies. But the Cabinet had chosen to ignore them when in July 2002 it announced that seven more Railway zones would be created. The rationale behind the Railway Reforms Committee's 1984 recommendation that four new Zones (in addition to the existing nine) could be created to improve operational efficiency and monitoring of freight movement can no longer be sustained. Today, communication technology can achieve these ends far better than human intervention. Already, the Indian Railways has started implementing a project to set in place a broadband optic fibre network, one of whose major objectives is to improve the administrative communication system and tracking of train movement. Thus, other than creating an administrative white elephant, and helping the BJP's regional satraps score political points, the new zone will serve no purpose.

It was in the early 1990s that Hubli staked its claim for zonal headquarters status. But the Congress and the Janata Dal Governments did not do much to follow up this claim. The Deve Gowda Government, which announced the formation of new zones including South Western Railway, in 1996 attempted to make Bangalore the zonal headquarters. In 1999, a Janata Dal leader went to court against any attempt by

the BJP regime to change the zonal headquarters from Bangalore to Hubli. The BJP fought the battle and has now succeeded in getting the zone to Hubli. But the issue had other emotional dimensions too. For example, the bitter controversy over including the Tornagal-Guntakkal section in the new zone. A two-year campaign centred round the fact that this section earns Rs.700 crores a year by moving iron ore from Bellary to Chennai Port. The zone would have been completely unviable and a non-starter if this revenue earning section had been excluded.

That the creation of zones is meeting mere political exigencies was laid bare in July 2002 after the bitter spat between the Trinamool Congress leader, Mamata Banerjee, and the NDA Government over the move to bifurcate Eastern Railway. The contention was that the new East Central Railway would gobble up nearly half the freight revenues earned from the coal belt of Dhanbad and Danapur. The Indian Railways has hardly benefited from these political bickerings at a time when it can no longer think of new avenues for raising revenue. Even by the Railway Minister's admission, internal generation of resources fell short of the targets by Rs. 888 crores due to shortfall of receipts. The record of the Railways, despite technological advances, in terms of adding significantly to its rolling stock, modernising infrastructure or passenger amenities, in correlation with the demand or national requirements, is hardly impressive. Perhaps, a wholly new model in planning and decision-making is necessary to generate more revenues. But such models can hardly be thought of when only political pressure and necessity goad the Ministry to act, that too to meet parochial demands. It is perhaps time the Railways is freed from direct control of the Ministry to function as a corporate undertaking, or a special PSU, with full administrative autonomy.

Dorji, Sonal Mansingh, Parasaran among Padma awardees

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, JAN. 25. For the second year in a row, no Bharat Ratna was announced today as the Government came out with a list of 92 Padma awardees on the eve of Republic Day with four Padma Vibhushans, 34 Padma Bhushans and 54 Padma Shris.

The highest of the three Padma awards — Padma Vibhushan — has this time round been conferred on the historian and biographer of both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, B.R. Nanda; the Delhi-based ayurveda practitioner, Bhrihaspati Dev Triguna; the Odissi dancer, Sonal Mansingh; and the former Sikkim Chief Minister, Kazi Lhendup Dorji, for public affairs.

Covering a wide spectrum of

activities ranging from art to science and engineering, the prominent names among the Padma Bhushans include the Editor of

India Today and host of a talk show on Aaj Tak, Prabhu Chawla; the ghazal singer, Jagjit Singh; and actor Naseeruddin Shah. Another journalist to make it to the Padma Bhushan list this year is T.V.R. Shenoy.

Besides, the right-wing Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh supremo, Dattopant

Bapurao Thengadi, has been given the Padma Bhushan for social work; the industrialist, N. Jamshyd Godrej, for trade and economic activity; the Kuchipudi dancer, Swapnasundari, for Indian classical dance; O.V. Vijayan and Sitakant Mahapatra for literature; and Teejan Bhai for folk music.

Bollywood has a considerable presence in the list of Padma Shri awardees with actor-producer Aamir Khan, Danny Denzongpa and Rakhee Gulzar promising to provide the glamour element to this year civil investiture ceremony.

Also among the awards are the Assamese director, Jahnu Barua; the 1998 Asian Games gold medal-winning athlete, Iyotirmoy Sikdar; and the eminent endocrinologist, N. Kochupillai.

Three foreigners have made it

to the awards this time round with Herbert Alexandrovich Yefromov of Russia and Herbert Fischer of Germany getting the Padma Bhushan for science & engineering and public affairs respectively, and Francis Dore of France getting the Padma Shri for public affairs.

The world of letters and art has cornered half of the 92 awards that have been announced. While the legal profession has got only a couple of awards with Parasaran Kesava Iyengar getting Padma Bhushan, and the former director of the National Law School, Bangalore, N.R. Madhava Menon Padma Shri, sports has a fair presence among the awards as do medicine and science & engineering.

Full list on Page 10



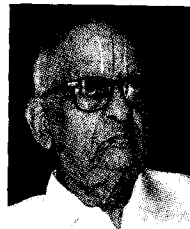
Sonal Mansingh (Padma Vibhushan)



Aamir Khan (Padma Shri)



Padma Subramaniam (Padma Bhushan)



Parasaran (Padma Bhushan)



Venkataraghavan (Padma Shri)

Vision 2020: Plan panel sees healthy, prosperous India

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: An India with no poverty, no illiteracy; an India where no person is without affordable access to good and basic healthcare, where every citizen has wide access to mobile and internet communication; a country where children bustle with energy and innovation, and where growth and basic social harmony are the cornerstones of national progress. Welcome to Vision 2020, courtesy the Planning Commission.

"Every country needs a vision statement which stirs the imagination and motivates all," said commission deputy chairman K.C. Pant while releasing the 97-page report here on Thursday. "This is an essential step in building a political consensus on a broad national strategy."

"This is neither a prediction of what will actually occur nor just a wish list. It is what we believe is possible for our nation to achieve...if we can (summon) confidence and determination," said Shyama Prasad Gupta, commission member who chaired the 30-month effort to harmonise the views of 40-odd experts and practitioners of public policy—from within and outside the government—into the Vision 2020 document.

Access to meaningful education and jobs, Mr Pant and Mr Gupta stress, is the key. Gupta had also authored the commission's strategy paper of May last year, formally endorsed by the Prime Minister, on ensuring that 10 million new jobs (mostly in the unorganised sector) are created each year for the next 10 years. "The capacity to pay is the economic equivalent of the right to vote. Employment must be considered a right of every citizen, backed by the government's full com-

The wish-list

The Vision 2020 report says it is possible to have an India 20 years hence which, among other things, has:

- Almost no unemployment or poverty
- Full literacy
- Nine per cent annual growth
- Food surplus in most categories, with access to food for the poor
- Full citizen access to healthcare, with state and private providers sharing the job
- Near-absence of under-nutrition
- All-weather roads connecting all villages with more than 500 people
- Widespread access to third-generation mobile communication

mitment," says Mr Gupta, emphasising that this is not a call for protecting the job markets from change.

The document says that Indians have to be equipped to adapt constantly to change—in technology, in trade, in jobs, in skills—and the greater the knowledge and skills in doing so, the more the quality and number of jobs and the resulting incomes.

With five to six per cent annual economic growth and the population growing at two per cent per year, the per capita income has doubled in the last 20 years. Pegging growth at nine per cent and that of population at 1.5 per cent, the income per head will quadruple by 2020. This would put India among the world's upper middle class, comprising, among others, Chile, Hungary and Malaysia.

A degenerating nuclear logic

By Achin Vanaik

ARE OUR memories so short? Doesn't anyone remember that veritable deluge of voices in the summer of 1998 from the ranks of our 'strategic establishment' assuring us that regional stability would be enhanced by first India and then Pakistan going openly nuclear? The wondrous workings of deterrence would usher in greater nuclear security for both countries as well as reduce the likelihood of conventional military conflict and tensions. There were those in the anti-nuclear camp who pointed out that this was inverted logic. That militarisation-nuclearisation are the symptoms and expressions of political hostility and cannot themselves undo or lessen that hostility since they can never address the deeper causes sustaining those hostilities. Indeed, that such nuclearisation would only exacerbate tensions. But their voices were simply ignored or dismissed.

Four-and-a-half years down the line who was right? Can anybody doubt or deny that relations between India and Pakistan are more embittered than in decades? That the presence of nuclear weapons, far from being a soothing balm, has simply added a dangerous, and new, layer of tensions to a situation of already abiding unease? The easy way out to explain this is to assign all the blame to Pakistan — its perfidiousness, abetment of terrorists, initiation of Kargil, and so on. Even if one accepts such a one-sided assessment that effectively exculpates India from all responsibility for the deterioration in mutual relations, it still exposes the lack of foresight by the pro-bomb lobby in India that was earlier so keen to claim all kinds of healing powers for the nuclearisation of the region, which incidentally was initiated by India not Pakistan?

Remember, too, the oft-repeated claim that there would be no competitive arms race between India and Pakistan! Yet both countries test, accumulate more weapons-grade material to make more and better warheads, expand the range of their missiles, put in place nuclear command and control systems which they assure us will work and make matters safer, even as both Govern-

ments indulge in a language of irresponsible nuclear arrogance and brinkmanship that was rarely ever witnessed between the U.S. and the former USSR even at the height of the Cold War. The reason for this contrast in styles and patterns of political behaviour is obvious. The conflict between the U.S. and the USSR was primarily ideological yet abstract — a clash between two systems upon which the passage of time would be left to pronounce comparative judgment. The conflict between India

The obvious follows. The Defence Minister, George Fernandes (not alone by any means), seeks to 'reassure' the Indian public that even if a couple of Indian cities are bombed, India will devastate Pakistan in reply. What an extraordinary state of affairs! Not one 'expert' is prepared to inform the Indian public that actually carrying out a second strike can never be an act of security retrieval or enhancement (once a first strike has taken place one's security has gone) but can only be an act of revenge.

means is that both countries are committed to a certain level of dispersion and delegation of authority to use nuclear weapons away from the Prime Minister or even the very topmost layer of political control, since decapitation can itself be very substantial. This dispersion-decentralisation of authority is itself a risk, and furthermore, there is still never going to be any guarantee that such alternative chains of command will adequately survive a massive first strike.

One should, therefore, expect a new kind of 'infighting' to now emerge within the Indian pro-nuclear lobby itself. There are going to be a number of voices now calling for abandoning the No-First-Use posture, since this might be read by Pakistan as an invitation to launch a massive first strike sometime in the future, for moving towards very high levels of preparedness such as provided by a "launch-on-warning" posture. It will then be argued that to make deterrence truly effective it is necessary to do this because only then is a massive second-strike attack against Pakistan virtually guaranteed so that it cannot hope to destroy India's retaliatory capacities through a huge first-strike no matter how decapitating or destructive this might be. So Pakistan will never strike first. Deterrence through a launch-on-warning posture is, of course, yet another level of madness in nuclear strategic thinking but that does not mean it won't come about. From 1982 to 1992 Russia made a No-First-Use pledge but like the U.S., it nonetheless in the 1980s adopted a launch-on-warning posture.

Even as regional nuclear disarmament is the only genuine assurance against use of nuclear weapons in South Asia, there is also the need for promoting nuclear risk-reduction measures as a transitional measure. It is a striking indication of the deep irresponsibility of the two Governments of India and Pakistan and of their respective pro-nuclear strategic establishments that to this date, the only serious efforts at drawing up, publishing and publicly distributing such risk reduction proposals have come from the ranks of the nuclear disarmament movement.

It is the constant search for the always-elusive 'credible' second-strike capacity that drove the U.S. and the USSR to an arms race that reached truly insane levels, and that will drive India and Pakistan to emulate them.

and Pakistan has long been directly political-territorial, repeatedly involving military engagement (conventional wars), and now with the rise of religious extremism in both countries (and the hatreds inspired by such extremism) far more dangerous even in its ideological dimension.

This is the context in which we have to view the latest developments of the setting up of a Nuclear Command Authority in India with its claim of institutionalising alternative chains of command (should the 'enemy' launch a pre-emptive 'decapitating' strike), and the dilution of its previous No Use commitment to non-nuclear states that are now warned that they can face nuclear attack even if they use chemical or biological weapons, though a huge chasm in terms of consequences still separates nuclear weapons from even these weapons. The degenerative logic of seeking security through nuclear weapons has now taken hold. The Musharraf Government in the typical fashion of nuclear bomb buffs has to claim various virtues for Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. So he declares that but for its nuclear power India would have launched a conventional attack on Pakistan. Moreover, he warns, Pakistan will reply 'unconventionally' to any future conventional Indian assault.

Moreover, it is a senseless act of revenge because it only initiates a further action-reaction chain of nuclear exchanges. Nor is anyone prepared to point out that if today India has the capacity to inflict more damage on Pakistan than vice versa, in due course Pakistan will acquire the missile range and stocks of warheads capable of effectively wiping out all of India, and that it is little 'consolation' for India to be able then to wipe out Pakistan several times over!

For all the current talk of being able to inflict "unacceptable damage" on the other side, the honest truth is that no can know for sure that after a significant or substantial or massive enemy first strike whether enough would be left over to inflict unacceptable damage in a retaliatory second-strike, besides the fact that such an act is merely irrational revenge. It was the constant search for the always-elusive 'credible' second-strike capacity that drove the U.S. and USSR to an arms race that reached truly insane levels, and that will drive India and Pakistan to emulate them on a much lower but still constantly escalating scale. Fear of a decapitating first strike has pushed India into developing "alternative" chains of command. No doubt Pakistan with much less strategic-territorial depth has done the same. Shorn of its euphemistic tone what this

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A PROMISING START

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COMING DAYS AFTER THE conference of NRIs and Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) in New Delhi, the Global Investor Meet (GIM) at Kochi held a new promise for Kerala. The Meet helped foreign and domestic investors look for a new focal point in south India. More than its actual outcome — firm investment commitments worth Rs. 8,000 crores — the GIM's significance was that it threw much light on the changing political mindset of Kerala's main political groupings. The A.K. Antony-led UDF Government did its best to achieve a political consensus with the Opposition Left Democratic Front on the point that inviting investments in industry and infrastructure will play a major role in improving the State's economy. The emerging consensus is significant because only a year ago, the two opposing groups of the State waged a bitter political battle on issues concerning economic reforms such as government downsizing and seeking a loan from the Asian Development Bank as a package to pull the Government back from bankruptcy.

The Prime Minister, A.B. Vajpayee's opening remarks at the GIM were yet another significant aspect of the meet. When he said Kerala could not remain trapped in outdated dogma and sterile ideological debates on issues such as labour reforms, the Prime Minister was underlining what reformists had all along been pointing out — the penchant of some parties in the State to try and stall economic policy changes. Indeed, the conference was an occasion to introspect as to why the State with its exemplary record in social and human development was lagging behind others in economic development. Mr. Vajpayee went to the extent of saying that political differences would not influence the NDA Government's readiness to help Kerala in its process of reform. The Left Democratic Front leader, V. S. Achuthanandan, who had earlier expressed serious reservations about some of the proposals to be discussed at the GIM, later said he would welcome "genuine investments". No longer is Kerala seen as investor unfriendly; instead, to quote industry captains, it is a new and attractive

alternative. In effect, the pre-event publicity blitz launched by the Kerala Government and the speeches made at the two-day meet itself, showed that political parties with opposing ideologies were willing to walk the path of consensus, at least on issues concerning industrial and infrastructure development and creating more jobs in a State whose unemployment figures are thrice the national average.

Kerala, held out as one of the world's top 10 tourist destinations, is today in an ideal position to launch itself into progress. A mass producer of rubber, coconuts, cashew, tapioca and spices, Kerala, known for its scenic beauty, relies greatly on its tourism sector, which accounts for nearly 6.7 per cent of the State's GDP, for attracting global investments. Through the GIM, the Government has promised to give more thrust to sectors such as tourism, agro-industries and food processing, information technology, education and health care. Even before the GIM began, the Government revealed its commitment to policy reform by recasting the Empowered Panel to clear investment projects, announcing a Rs.7,000-crore mega-project to build a 515-km expressway right across the State.

All these hold immense promise for a State which is yet to achieve its full economic and industrial potential. But Mr. Antony's challenge now lies in sustaining the reform process, even while seeking to do it through his well known method. This may be difficult to achieve considering Mr. Achuthanandan's letter to the Chief Minister before the GIM objecting to some of the proposals such as inviting bids for privatisation of water supply and commercial use of its rivers. In terms of resource endowment, the State itself does not have vast tracts of land for industry-backed growth. However, the State has great opportunity for adding value to products and services that are unique to Kerala. It is time Kerala looked beyond its massive NRI repatriation to attracting more investment and multiplying employment opportunities for its highly educated youth.

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The political NRI

19/11 ✓
15/11

CONSIDERING HOW loosely we use these definitions these days, you could probably call me a sort of Person of Indian Origin (PIO) or a near-Non Resident Indian (NRI). The reason is that I was born in London, have the right of residence in UK and could, if I had so desired, have opted for a British passport. I could even have taken the British passport and continued to live in India — as so many others do — thus enjoying the best of both worlds.

Of course, the British passport was never a serious option because there was never any doubt in my mind that I was an Indian who wanted to live in India. (Think about it: would you take any comment I made about Indian politics at all seriously if you knew that my commitment to India was so shallow that I preferred to remain a foreign national?)

But much of my father's family lives abroad. My grandparents (no great believers in family planning, evidently) had six sons, of whom five lived abroad at some stage of their lives. Of their five daughters, three became NRIs. And even those siblings who had opted to live in India saw to it that their children became NRIs. And so, when we plan a family get-together these days, New York is usually the most convenient venue.

Because of my family background, I have some understanding of what it is to be an NRI or a PIO. Most of my relatives have made their lives in the West. As

far as they are concerned, India is home only in an emotional sense. If there is a crisis or a disaster, they will go out of their way to help. But they also recognise that they have chosen to live in other countries and are content to leave us to cope with India's problems.

My relatives represent one kind of NRI. But there are many other kinds. Each time I travel to the UK, I come across bright young people who talk like Brits, think like Brits and act like Brits (though they tend to work harder than most Brits) even though they look Indian. But for most of them, India is not even the country their parents came from: their families moved to East Africa generations ago. Nevertheless, they are still PIOs.

Then there are the Indians of the West Indies. Their ancestors left India centuries ago. Most speak no Indian language. They will never visit India in their lives. Till recently, they didn't even think much of India. (In the sixties, before he learnt to love the BJP, V.S. Naipaul wrote proudly about how far ahead of India his native Trinidad was.) And yet, they are part of the diaspora.

If India seems a long way away from Guyana or Surinam, it seems much closer to the Indians who live and work in the Gulf. Most believe that they will come home one day and their commitment to the mother country is the strongest of all immigrant communities. Certainly, it is their re-

mittances that have ensured that our foreign exchange reserves keep growing.

And then there are the international Indians — people like Amartya Sen, who may live in England or America, but who remain resolutely Indian in their minds. Zubin Mehta may live in Los Angeles and be regarded as a national hero in Israel but he is proud to hang on to his Indian passport. Salman Rushdie may now make his home in New York but his imagination and sensibility remain determinedly Indian.

That diversity is the distinguishing characteristic of the Indian diaspora: it contains many different kinds of people, some of whom have absolutely nothing in common but whose origins are undeniably Indian.

In recent years, the Government of India has recognised that NRIs represent a potent store of goodwill for our country. The recently concluded NRI meet in Delhi was an attempt to harness that goodwill.

Given my family background, it should come as no surprise that I am fully in support of this initiative. But I do, nevertheless, have two reservations about the way in which all this is being handled. One: I am concerned that we are concentrating on one kind of NRI at the expense of all the others. And two: I think we need to make it clear to people of Indian origin that while they may be our brothers and sisters, they don't actually want to live in this

COUNTERPOINT

Vir Sanghvi



I think we need to make it clear to people of Indian origin that while they may be our brothers and sisters, they don't actually want to live in this country. We do. And, therefore, we have the right to decide how the country should be run. They don't.

country. We do. And, therefore, we have the right to decide how the country should be run. They don't.

Both reservations are interconnected. My fear about the NRI initiative is that it is being hijacked by the kind of non-resident political activist who has hosted BJP leaders on their visits to America for 30 years and now feels that the Government of India should pay him back.

One of the most depressing aspects of any prime ministerial trip to the US (England, somehow, is better) is the manner in which assorted NRI outfits, all boasting of links to the Sangh Parivar, jostle for importance, each trying to run down the other.

Most of these people have no understanding of India, yet they profess to know the solutions to our problems. They misrepresent Indian history, exaggerate their own importance and kick Indian officials around, demanding to be treated as VIPs. Even this would be pardonable if they weren't so busy trying to knife each other.

During each of A.B. Vajpayee's annual visits to the US, the NRI squabbles have emerged. At the Delhi NRI conference, one group of US-based PIOs was so upset that the other had been given importance that its leaders boycotted the event.

The most public symbol of this kind of NRI is Bhishma K. Agnihotri, the so-called ambassador for NRIs. Agnihotri wants to be treated as a diplomat by the US

state department while simultaneously retaining his US green card. No wonder official Washington does not take him seriously.

But there are important questions about the Agnihotri appointment. Who decided that this man represented the diaspora? Why should he be given ambassadorial rank? Why should the Indian tax-payer foot his bills?

Simple answer: because he is a BJP loyalist of long standing.

I have nothing against political loyalists but it worries me when we try and reduce the richness of the diaspora to the narrow band of Indian politics. What does Agnihotri have in common with the East African Asian kid on the streets of Wembley? How does he represent the Malayali carpenter in Dubai? Should we allow our entire NRI initiative to be hijacked by overseas political activists?

Which brings me to my second reservation. The vast majority of PIOs are interested in Indian politics only in the most general sense. But there is a small and noisy minority that wishes to participate in Indian political dialogue from overseas.

From time to time, you will see letters on the internet from NRIs in San Antonio, Texas, or Burlington, Vermont, telling us how we should invade PoK, nuke Pakistan or throw all Muslims out. We will be lectured on what is wrong with India and subjected to diatribes about our political behaviour.

My response to all kinds of

overseas political activism — whether in the form of commentary or actual intervention — has always been the same. If you think you have the solutions to our problems then come and live here and face the music. I have no interest in the political views of a computer salesman in Seattle who possesses a US passport, keeps his savings in an American bank and brings his kids up as Americans. I wish him well and recognise our shared heritage.

But I don't think that he has any right to hold forth on how a country he has chosen *not* to live in ought to be run.

As much as I love the diaspora, I believe that only resident Indians have the right to participate in Indian politics. If India goes down the drain, then so do we.

I don't think most NRIs will disagree with me. The disagreements will come from the noisy minority of politically ambitious networkers and net-obsessed nerds.

My worry is that this minority is being given the right to speak for all NRIs. In fact, they have much less of a right to do so than even the humblest construction worker in Abu Dhabi who sends his savings back to India and dreams of building a house in a Cochin suburb. The worker has a stake in India. The noisy minority has, at best, an emotional bond.

I have respect for that bond because it can unite people of Indian origin all over the world. But let's not make the mistake of confusing heritage with politics.

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Naipaul faults Govt. handling of Tehelka

15/1

By Anita Joshua

NEW DELHI, JAN. 14. Upset with the manner in which the Government had "persecuted" those associated with the Tehelka portal, the Nobel laureate, V. S. Naipaul, today hoped that the Government would at some point of time withdraw from "the sorry state of affairs" and admit its "lack of graciousness."

Here to participate in the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas celebrations, Sir Vidia and his wife, Nadira Naipaul, met the Deputy Prime Minister, L. K. Advani, to discuss the Tehelka case and impress upon him the fact that the Tehelka story had damaged the image of India overseas. Also, according to him, Mr. Advani indicated that the "nature of the coalition" was responsible for the way the case had been handled.

Though not quite sure of how the matter would be resolved, Sir Vidia was optimistic and said "probably something good will come out of the ashes." And, he based his optimism on the fact



Nobel Laureate V.S. Naipaul and his wife, Nadira, at a press conference in New Delhi on Tuesday. —Photo: Rajeev Bhatt

that though the Government had been successful in destroying Tehelka, the task undertaken by the portal and the manner in which "Tarun Tejpal and his team stood up to the persecution" had been "acclaimed by a large section of the Indian population."

Talking to mediapersons along with Mr. Tejpal at a press conference here primarily to articulate his support for Tehelka — of which he is a Board member — and his views on the BJP, the Nobel laureate said he was disappointed with the handling of the Tehelka case; particularly as he had "some amount of goodwill" for the BJP.

Of the view that it was inevitable for "people at the bottom" to "develop a sense that their country had had a bad time in the past and try to deal with it" at a certain stage of the nation's self-awareness, Sir Vidia said the intellectual community of the country ought to have engaged such forces in a dialogue.

Narrating his interactions with the BJP youth members — who had met him twice over the past year — the writer said: "They were full of passion, but did not have any programme."

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'INDIA NEED NOT BE A SOFT STATE'

Internal security situation extremely grave: Advani

By Anjali Mody

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14/1

ON BOARD THE SPECIAL AIRCRAFT, JAN. 13. The deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, today said the security situation in India was "extremely grave". Not like an "emergency" but "like war".

A reflection of this was the fact that all the leaders of India were "under threat all the time".

This was not the case in any other country, he told media-persons while on his way to the Brahmaputra Beach festival at Guwahati in which he was the chief guest.

"One Lord Mountbatten was killed... there was a bomb attack on Margaret Thatcher," he said adding, "given everything I know, I feel I am alive only because of luck."

Mr. Advani said cross-border terrorism from Pakistan and India's eastern neighbours had made "even the internal security situation a war-like situation". However, he sought to draw a distinction between Pakistan and the eastern neighbours. The latter, he said, supported "indigenous", not foreign, terrorist organisations, gave them asylum, gave them arms, "but not in the manner Pakistan gives them."

Such was the concern over internal security, Mr. Advani said, that the meetings in Delhi of Governors, Chief Secretaries and Directors-General of Police had focused on the subject. The Government's approach in dealing with the problem was that "India is a democratic country, but a democratic state need not be a soft state."

He said it was democracy which made the Government



The Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, the Assam Governor, S.K. Sinha, and the Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi, at the 'Brahmaputra beach festival' in Guwahati on Monday. — PTI

talk to the Naga secessionist movement, the NSCN (I-M), and to reverse the decisions that were "not fair" — for example, the one not to prosecute the journalist, Iftikhar Gilani. Equally, he said, it was "the urgency to dispel the image of a

soft state" which led the Government to suspend the passport of "elements who keep on running down the country, even abroad." Asked if he did not believe that a democracy like India could survive criticism at home or abroad, he said, "No. I do not

see that. Democracy does not mean allowing everyone to do whatever they want. Which country allows that?"

Mr. Advani commended the United States President, George W. Bush, who is reported to have authorised the U.S. Air Force to shoot down any plane that was hijacked, after news came in of the first three plane attacks on September 11. He said that this willingness to take the 100 or so civilian casualties that this would have entailed was an example of "a democracy which is not soft."

On the subject of "absconding terrorists", he said the Government was "still hopeful" of having the underworld don and Bombay blasts accused, Abu Salem, extradited from Portugal. The fact that the Portuguese had arrested him and kept him in jail this long was a good sign.

No compromise, says Gogoi

By Anjali Mody

GUWAHATI, JAN. 13. The Assam Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi, has welcomed the talks in India between the Centre and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (I-M). He said he would ask the United Liberation Front of Asom and all militant organisations in the northeast to follow the example of the NSCN (I-M) in seeking a solution through dialogue. But his Government would never support the formation of a "greater Nagaland". Speaking at the inauguration of the annual 'Brahmaputra Beach festival' at which the Union Home Minister, L.K. Advani, was the chief guest, he said, "We have heard about the concept of 'greater Nagaland' but the State Government would oppose any move to compromise with the boundaries of the State".

Lady Naipaul puts Advani on backfoot

HT Correspondent

New Delhi, January 10

TRUST A Naipaul to set a cat among the pigeons. It was all hunky-dory at the NRI convention on Friday, when Lady Nadira Naipaul — wife of the literature Nobel laureate — put a simple question to LK Advani.

Does the Vajpayee Government think that Muslims, Christians and other minorities in India are as Indian as (Hindu) NRIs and People of Indian Origin?

The organisers had done away with the scheduled question-answer session with the Deputy Prime Minister, but there was no

way Advani could have brushed this one away.

Termining the charge implied in the question as “unfair”, a cornered Advani said: “I don’t blame you. An image has been created that the Government is concerned only about Hindus. It’s an unfair image.”

He was “sad” and “ashamed”, Advani added, of what had happened in Gujarat.

The Deputy PM — who shared the dais with Sir VS Naipaul, House of Lords member Lord Navneet Dholakia, Trinidad and Tobago Senate member Linda Baboolal and former Indian High Commissioner to Britain

LM Singhvi — declared that India “can never be a theocratic state... Theocracy is unacceptable to Indian history, culture and ethos. The Constitution guarantees that. Gujarat was an aberration.”

Lady Naipaul’s poser was prompted by Lord Navneet’s impassioned speech in which he said that if PIOs were to “tear open their chests” like Hanuman to prove their loyalty to Rama and Sita, “in each would be found etched a map of India.”

In his speech, Advani said the NRI convention was possible because of the “coming age of India and the coming age of Indians

living abroad... Our *Bharatiyata* is a *jugalbandi* of *Bharatvasis* and *Bharatvanshis*. And my vision of India is that never again should Indians be forced to go out to earn their living.”

Earlier, Sir Vidia had suggested that the expatriate Indians’ convention had been organised with an eye to improving the country’s economy. Advani differed with this view, but agreed with the author that Indians should stop blaming the British for all that is wrong with the country. Advani released the Hindi translation of Naipaul’s *Beyond Belief* on the occasion.

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Non-responsive Indians

✓ 5/26 Futile courting of NRIs 11/1

It is extraordinarily unclear just what the government seeks to achieve — bar a get together and 72-hour media attention — via the non-resident Indians (NRI) jamboree in Delhi. The politically correct nomenclature, Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, and the three day talk fest — from culture and diaspora identity to financial services — cannot shut out three basic facts about the NRI-India relationship. First, NRIs are “patriotic” when it comes to cricket and Bollywood but not when the issue is parking their investable funds. Second, they have no reason to be patriotic about their money if India does not offer attractive opportunities. Third, as long as India remains a bureaucratic nightmare, NRIs will shun the country as much as full blooded foreigners do. There will be the odd project but a replication of the Chinese experience will not be kickstarted by ceremonial and interactive sessions in Delhi. The Chinese diaspora took to China only after the Communist Party, led by Deng Xiaoping, threw Marxist dogma out of the window and started providing serious incentives. The patriotic factor kicked in only when the country was “worth” loving. China did not concentrate on portfolio investments via special diaspora accounts. India has, offering NRIs deposit schemes in which no questions were asked about taxes and origins of the money and, sometimes, ridiculously high rates of interest were paid. The economic utility of these schemes are doubtful at best. Nor will offers of dual citizenship persuade more NRIs to shift their investments to India. Dual citizenship minus the franchise, in the current context, is simply an emotional and personal convenience issue. For NRIs spending long stretches in India, dual citizenship offers the advantage of making working life or decisions like buying real estate easier, while retaining the “other” passport, which makes travel elsewhere smoother. This is good for NRIs but irrelevant as far as Indian economic or business interests are concerned.

Given this, it is particularly inapt that the government chose 9 January, the anniversary of the Mahatma's decision to leave South Africa and come back to India, as the inaugural day for the NRI pow wows. Apart from trivialising that momentous decision, the symbolism also shows the hypocrisy and confusion behind the NRI initiative. The government wants NRIs to do their bit for a country the NRIs think is good only in bits and pieces. There's a stubborn and official failure to recognise that almost all post-Independence migration from India has been economic and that non-material calculations relate mostly to personal, cultural and entertainment decisions. Cricket and Bollywood, that is, and to help understand that all over again the government needn't have spent Rs 11 crores for the NRI bash. It would be impolite but right to say that the money would have been better spent on poor RIs (resident Indians) than rich NRIs.

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STRENGTHENING THE BONDS

IN A GENERAL sense, granting dual citizenship to People of Indian Origin (PIO) is a way of welcoming them back home — of officially reclaiming those whose cultural and emotional bonds tie them to this country. But more specifically, the Centre's decision to introduce legislation to make dual citizenship possible also addresses a mutual need. As for the PIOs, they have been petitioning for Indian passports for many years, puzzled by New Delhi's attitude of praising their cooperation and support in promoting India, on the one hand, and of continuing to refuse them dual nationality, on the other. As for India, it stands to benefit economically from seeking a broader relationship with PIOs and the grant of dual citizenship is an important step in this direction. Given its mutually advantageous character, it is rather odd that dual citizenship was not granted earlier. Apart from possible apathy, the main reason for the delay was objections on the grounds of security, a fear that often tended to assume a paranoiac dimension in the corridors of decision-making and power.

Dual citizenship was one of the many recommendations of the L.M. Singhvi-headed Committee on the Indian Diaspora, which made a number of suggestions towards engaging PIOs in a more mutually beneficial interaction. In keeping with the Committee's recommendations, dual citizenship will not be available for nationals of neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka — a measure that obviously springs from security considerations. As things stand, it appears that dual citizenship will be limited to those PIOs in countries such as the U.S., the U.K., Canada and Australia — a decision that is likely to be criticised for being selective and discriminatory. But for those who do finally become eligible though, dual citizenship will be a genuine article in comparison with the poor substitute that has been on offer — the PIO card. Introduced with much fanfare in 1999, the PIO card — which conferred certain privileges such as no visa requirement and exemption from registration — was generally viewed as much too prohibitive or, at any rate, not really

worth the meagre benefits. From the country's point of view, harnessing the cooperation of the PIOs — who number a staggering 20 million — is an opportunity it can hardly afford to miss. The Indian Diaspora now covers virtually every part of the globe and can prove to be an important element in determining India's external relations with a number of countries. Moreover, it has a great potential to play in the country's economic development. As the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas got under way, the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, told the gathering that he was looking towards the PIOs to share the richness of their experience with India. But it is obvious that behind such well-meaning platitudes lies the desire towards getting the PIOs more economically engaged in this country. Not surprisingly, the promise of granting dual citizenship has been accompanied by the examination of a number of proposals to attract additional investment from Indians living abroad.

New Delhi cannot be unaware of the extraordinary role played by the overseas Chinese community in contributing towards its so-called recent economic miracle. A significant proportion of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows into China comes from people of Chinese origin; during the 1980s, the very period when the Chinese economy began to open up, about two-thirds of FDI came from overseas Chinese. It would be simplistic to assume that the PIOs can do for India what the PICs did for China. The two situations are incomparable for a number of reasons, among them the fact that while the overseas Chinese community is largely entrepreneurial or business-oriented, most of the Indians residing abroad are part of the salariat. Nevertheless, the PIOs — who have excelled in all manner of fields in the country of their adoption — need to be tapped much more effectively. Dual citizenship is an important step forward. But obviously the extent of further PIO involvement will also depend on general factors such as the quality of governance, the law and order situation and the opportunities to make reasonable profits.

THE HINDU

PM promises NRIs dual citizenship

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: The government proposes to introduce legislation for dual citizenship in the budget session of parliament, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced to a cheering crowd of NRIs in the inaugural session of the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas here on Thursday.

Saying that the government had decided to accept the recommendations of the L.M. Singhvi committee in this regard, Mr Vajpayee said dual citizenship would be permitted for certain countries and the government was now working on the administrative regulations and procedures governing it.

However, Mr Vajpayee also cautioned against divided loyalties, saying that Indians who had chosen to settle in foreign lands should be loyal to their country of adoption.

While details of the proposed dual citizenship are yet to be worked out, the PM's reference to "certain" countries makes it clear that only persons of Indian origin from a few Western nations will be chosen for the honour. The countries/regions identified by the Singhvi committee are the US, Canada, Britain, the European Union, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Japan

and New Zealand.

A possessor of dual citizenship would have no political rights but would have residency rights without any restrictions.

For the Gulf region, which will be out of the ambit of dual citizenship, the PM announced a compulsory insurance scheme for Indian workers migrating to the region and a welfare fund for overseas Indian workers.

Earlier, the PM presented the "Pravasi Bharatiya Samman" awards to 10 "pravasi Bharatiyas". They are: Anerood Jugnauth, Prime Minister of Mauritius, Dato Ser S. Samy Velu, minister for works, Malaysia, Shridath Ramphal, former secretary-general of the Commonwealth from Guyana, Fatima Mir of South Africa, Lord Navnit Dholakia of the UK, Rajat Gupta of the US, Kanakshi Gokaldas Khimji of Oman, Ujjal Dosanjh of British Columbia, Manu Chandaria of Africa and Bob Naroomal Harileela of Hong Kong.

Comment: The NRI meet, and proposals like dual citizenship, are welcome first steps. But we should learn from China - whose diaspora is bigger and more lucrative than ours - how to reap maximum benefits from emigrant populations.

10 JAN 2003

'PROJECT POSITIVE ASPECTS ABROAD'

Dual citizenship for PIOs in some countries: PM

By Amit Baruah

NEW DELHI, JAN. 9. The Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, today announced that the Government had decided to permit "dual citizenship" for People of Indian Origin (PIO) "living in certain countries".

"We are now working on the administrative regulations and procedures governing dual citizenship. We will introduce the necessary legislation during the Budget session of Parliament," he said.

Inaugurating the first-ever 'Pravasi Bharatiya Divas' at the Pragati Maidan here, Mr. Vajpayee did not give any details about the kind of "dual citizenship" that was being proposed. (It is likely that "dual passports" will be allowed for Indian-origin citizens of the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and a couple of other countries.)

"Indians who have chosen to settle in foreign lands should be loyal to their country of adoption. The biggest challenge facing every immigrant community is to integrate harmoniously into the political, economic and social life of the host society, while preserving and cherishing its civilisational heritage. Over the years, Indians have achieved this delicate balance virtually everywhere, without a contradiction between their adopted citizenship and their Indian identity," he told the large gathering of overseas Indians, adding that the decision on "dual citizenship" was taken in "this background".

Welfare fund

Mr. Vajpayee also announced a "compulsory insurance scheme" for the Indian workers migrating to the Persian Gulf. "Parliament is already considering a Bill to establish a welfare fund for overseas Indian workers. To meet the educational needs of their children, we plan to reserve a certain portion of seats in our academic institutions."

Mr. Vajpayee presented 'Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Pu-



The recipients of the 'Pravasi Bharatiya Samman' with the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, after the inauguration of the first 'Pravasi Bharatiya Divas' in New Delhi on Thursday. — Photo: Shanker Chakravarty

raskars' to Anerood Jugnauth (Mauritius), Fatima Meer (South Africa), Hari N. Harilela (Hong Kong, PRC), Kanakbhai Khemji (Oman), Manilal Chanderia (Kenya), Navneet Dholakia (U.K.), Rajat Gupta (U.S.) Shridath Ramphal (Guyana), Samy Velu (Malaysia) and Ujjal Dosanjh (Canada).

In a departure from the norm, the Prime Minister acknowledged the emigration of doctors, engineers and managers in the 1970s, but that of plumbers, electricians and nurses to West Asia. He also referred to the despatch of Indian indentured labour to work in the sugar plantations in the British empire. "Many of you — or your forefathers — left India in search of fortune or better livelihood. Today, India itself has become a land of opportunity."

'A homecoming'

Describing the 'Pravasi Divas' as a homecoming, Mr. Vajpayee said it was also a "grand occasion" for India to pay tribute to its "sons and daughters" who

had succeeded in reaching the "pinnacle in so many fields of human endeavour" all over the world.

"The benchmarks for success, which the Pravasi community has set, are a challenge for us in India. They make us examine why the Indian is so much more innovative, productive and successful abroad than in his own country. They prod us to create a business, investment and economic climate which is conducive to success as anywhere else in the world. We are prepared to respond to your expectations from India... we do not want your riches, we want the richness of your experience."

"We are aware of the slow progress in several areas of our social sector development, but we are determined to move faster than before. All in all, we are guided by the ambitious goal of making India a developed nation by 2020."

The Government, he said, would like to create an environment in India, which will make overseas Indians want to return;

and not just for sentimental or emotional reasons.

In what could be a reference to the massacre of innocents in Gujarat, Mr. Vajpayee said the positive aspects of India were not being projected abroad. "It is far more likely that mindless political gossip or isolated acts of crime and violence would dominate the headlines around the world. At the same time, you can project the truth about India to the world in a credible and effective manner. Misleading, one-sided negative pictures are often put out due to bias, ignorance or design."

Mr. Vajpayee also had a word of advice for the PIOs. While linguistic associations abroad had a useful role to play, it was also necessary for the PIOs to strengthen the broader Indian identity in their countries of residence. "When you are united as Indians, your voice carries greater weight: both for highlighting issues of concern in your host country, and for promoting Indian causes."

Emulate Jewish Diaspora, says Jaswant: Page 12

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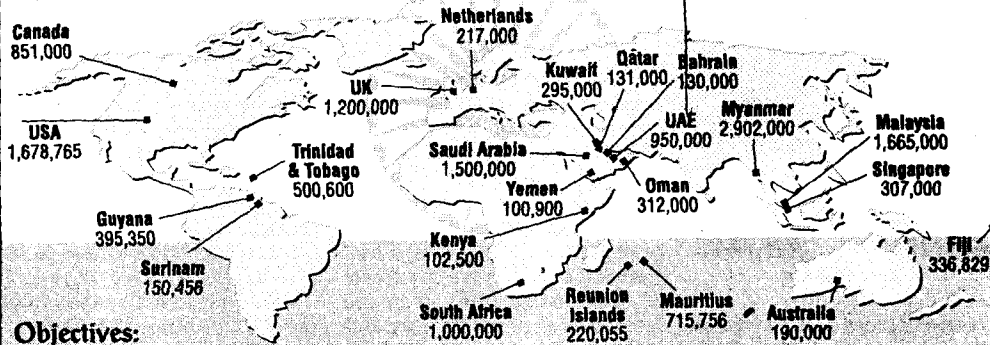
Pravasi Bharatiya DIVAS

The Indian Diaspora is about 20 million strong and spread across 110 countries. A high level committee was set up by the Ministry of External Affairs in September 2000 to study the Indian Diaspora and recommend measures for forging a constructive relationship between India and its Diaspora. The committee recommended that Pravasi Bhartiya Divas should be held on January 9 every year in recognition and appreciation of the constructive economic, political and philanthropic role played by the Indian Diaspora.

January 9 was chosen because it was on this day Mahatma Gandhi returned from South Africa to lead India's struggle for freedom

The Indian Diaspora

Major concentrations of Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) and Indian citizens. (Total worldwide strength: about 20 million)



Objectives:

- Understanding the sentiments of NRIs and PIOs about India and create a policy framework for a sustained and productive interaction
- Acquainting the Indian people with the achievements of the Indian Diaspora and their expectations from India
- Creating a network of the Indian Diaspora across 110 countries of the world
- Recognising the contributions made by the Indian Diaspora towards improving India's relationship with the host countries

KBK Infographics

THE HINDU

10 JAN 2003

Beyond emotion

Dual citizenship to NRIs implies pragmatic duties and constructive engagement

INDIA'S prodigal sons and daughters will return to the motherland for the three-day Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas aimed at celebrating the achievements of the Indian diaspora and to inaugurate a new era in fruitful economic links between People of Indian Origin (PIOs) and their abandoned homeland. The stated aim of the conference, which opens in Delhi tomorrow, is to follow the example of the Chinese emigres and leverage the wealth of overseas Indians to investment opportunities at home. In return for their investment, the government has promised dual citizenship to the visitors, that is all benefits of citizenship without voting rights or the right to contest elections.

Historian Benedict Anderson, author of the bestselling book *Imagined Communities*, has often pointed out that dual citizenship is the key safeguard against the 'malign' influence of what he has termed 'long distance nationalism' or 'e-mail nationalism'. That distance makes the heart grow not only fonder but also fiercer is borne out in the overseas support to several violent 'nationalist' movements such as the IRA, the Tamil Tigers, the Khalistan movement as well as, on the smaller scale, to groups like the ULFA. It is only when an immigrant develops real stakes in his homeland that he begins to exercise his wealth and influence as responsibly and as accountably as any citizen. Thus, not only will dual citizen-

ship facilitate smoother travel for NRIs but it might also encourage a realistic engagement with the needs of modern India.

This country is justifiably proud of those who left situations of rural poverty to become, over new generations, politicians in Canada or indeed prime ministers of Mauritius or Fiji and of those who after Indian degrees have secured success in international financial institutions or have created corporate empires. Yet for relations between India and its exiles to become meaningful there is a need to go beyond emotion and discover clear means by which NRIs can make positive contributions to the land they claim as their emotional touchstone. While there are several examples of emigre communities playing an outstanding role in earthquake relief, in endowing universities, in setting up hospitals and in enriching culture with original artifacts of East-West fusion, there remains the constant danger of high-wattage NRI emotion being channelised into divisive politics. The date of the Pravasi Diwas has been set to coincide with the date of the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi to India, reminding us that the father of the nation was non-resident for many years of his life. Perhaps the new overseas 'citizens' of India might find ways to make their presence in their homeland as constructive, as pragmatic and as down-to-earth, as was the presence of India's greatest NRI.

8 JAN 2003

INDIAN EXPRESS

21 dead, Nitish blames officials

HT Correspondents *gll*
Hyderabad/Mumbai, January 3

TWENTY-ONE PASSENGERS were killed and 70 injured when the Secunderabad-Manmad Express rammed into a goods train and derailed at Ghat Nandur railway station near Parli in Maharashtra in the early hours of Friday. Many of the passengers were pilgrims heading for the Sai Baba temple at Shirdi.

Railway Minister Nitish Kumar admitted the tragedy — the second such accident in the region in a fortnight — was caused by “human failure” and warned of stern action against the erring officials. He said the assistant station master and a pointman were absconding since the accident.

The condition of six of the injured passengers was stated to be critical. The others were administered first aid at the site and shifted to Ambajogai Government Medical Hospital, 18 km from Ghat Nandur.

South Central Railway officials said the accident occurred around 1.30 am at a spot about 330 km north of Hyderabad. According to preliminary reports, the express train, which was to move into a loopline, accidentally got into the main line and rammed into a goods train. As a result, the engine and three coaches (a general coach, one AC 3-tier coach and the luggage van) of the express train got derailed.

Preliminary reports indicated that the express train's driver ap-

HT 1/11
plied emergency brakes to avoid ramming into the goods train. The derailment was caused by the sudden braking, without which it could have been much worse. The fate of the driver is n't known.

Kumar praised the driver for averting a major accident. He announced an ex gratia of Rs 1 lakh for the kin of the dead, Rs 15,000 for the seriously injured and Rs 5,000 for those with minor injuries.

The rest of the passengers were taken to Parli by buses, from where they left for Manmad by another train.

A special train carrying the relatives of the passengers left for the accident site from Secunderabad at 9.30 am. Minister of State for Railways Bandaru Dattatreya and Indian Railway Board chairman IIMS Rana rushed to the site.

Aurangabad Collector V Radha went on record saying rescue operations were haphazard and delayed. Local people, rather than the authorities, came to the aid of the injured and the other passengers. The survivors were fed through the day by local villagers at Ghatnandur, who arranged food for coachloads of people. Incidentally, Radha's mother-in-law was on the express train. She survived.

The SCR has opened a helpline for information on the accident and the passengers. The numbers are: 040-27702056; 040-27830438; 02446-252732 and 02591-222242.

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GM WRITES TO RAILWAY BOARD CHIEF

Bifurcation woes plague ER

Abantika Ghosh in Kolkata

KOLKATA, Jan. 2. — Three months after the division, Eastern Railway is saddled with considerable financial losses and operational difficulties.

ER's general manager, Mr Sunil Sengupta, wrote to the Railway Board chairman, Mr IIMS Rana, on 28 November 2002, drawing the latter's attention to the problems and seeking the board's intervention. The Statesman has a copy of the letter.

The letter states that ER's earning since the bifurcation on 1 October 2002 has "come down to 36.7 per cent (drop in passenger and freight earnings in October 2002 were 27.3 per cent and 77.7 per cent). The expenditure was down to only 67 per cent in October 2002. Concerted efforts are required to be made to augment the earning and reduce expenditure in order to make ER viable."

In an annexure, the letter mentions problems in various departments like planning, accounts, engineering and signal and telecommunications. It calls for a review of the financial procedure because "ER is left with all the originating stations, freight terminals, C&W depots, loco sheds, and goods' sheds. The loss of earning due to drastic shrinkage of route km needs to be compensated."

Forty-three per cent of the employees at the ER headquarters were supposed to be transferred to the newly formed East-Central Railway. Employees were asked to state their option. But, the annexure says, the "number of options received is far less and it may not be possible to offset the surplus at the ER headquarters completely." The S&T department is plagued by inadequate control communication with Hajipur, "the bottleneck being the limited number of channels between Danapur and Hajipur hired from BSNL".

The erstwhile ER Track Machine Organ-

Mamata sticks to stand

KOLKATA, Jan. 2. — Miss Mamata Banerjee today said her return to the Union ministry would depend on the "resolution" of the railway bifurcation issue. "Our party had taken this stand in July and it remains unchanged. We are neither *agachha* (weeds) nor *pargachha* (parasites)."

Naidu to skip Trinamul meet

Mr Venkaiah Naidu won't attend the 6 January Trinamul rally on Brigade Parade ground. It came as a blow to Miss Banerjee's party. The Prime Minister had earlier expressed inability to attend the rally. Mr Naidu message was conveyed to the Trinamul by the BJP's state unit chief, Mr Tathagata Roy. — SNS

isation, based at Moghulsarai, will be transferred to ECR on 1 April and "ER will not be having any repair maintenance depot". Similar is the case with the ER Bridge Works, Bridge Inspector's Training Institute and Flash Butt Welding Plant. The letter talks of the need to develop a BITI, bridge workshop and a flash butt welding plant.

Substantial paperwork for the ECR, including compilation of traffic accounts, is being done by ER. But, the annexure says, dealing with ECR for any problems related to "commercial and operating matters on a day-to-day basis is not feasible with the bifurcation. It is felt that the responsibility for running these traffic accounts cells should be taken over by an officer of ECR."

The ER stores department still has to ensure supply of stock materials till March/May 2004. "In effect the load of the stores department has not reduced at all". But posts have been curtailed so that "the department is having problems in smooth functioning."

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THE STATESMAN