

UN Council for a halt to Afghan fighting

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 24: The Security Council issued a new call Wednesday for an immediate halt to the fighting in civil war-stricken Afghanistan and threw its support behind a UN mission seeking national reconciliation, reports Reuter.

"The Council supports this mission, which is due to leave Geneva soon, and urges all Afghans to assist it in carrying out its mandate and thus promote a cessation of hostilities, the resumption of humanitarian aid and the restoration of peace in Afghanistan," a statement read out at a brief Council meeting said.

The mission, which will seek the views of a broad spectrum of Afghan leaders on how the United Nations might best help with national reconciliation and reconstruction, is headed by former Tunisian Foreign Minister Mahmoud Mestiri.

More than 11,000 people have been killed in power struggles in Kabul since Mujahideen guerrillas removed the former communist government in April 1992 and set up a coalition Islamic government.

The Security Council also expressed deep regret that a food blockade was increasing the hardship suffered by the people of Kabul, where hundreds of thousands are starving.

The council continues to believe that the seriousness of the humanitarian situation is entirely due to the ongoing fighting in Afghanistan, and calls for its immediate cessation, the statement said.

It stressed the importance of the council attached to full compliance with international humanitarian law and said those who violated it bore individual responsibility.

The council also called for the immediate removal of obstacles to the passage of humanitarian aid and urged the international community to extend assistance to alleviate suffering.

US to keep pressure on Pakistan to stop terrorism in Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Mar 24: The United States will continue to put pressure on Pakistan to refrain from supporting terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, visiting US Assistant Secretary of State Robin Raphel said here Wednesday, reports Xinhua.

Raphel said in her meeting with the Congress-I leaders Wednesday that terrorists were encouraged by some organisations in Pakistan.

She said that her country had always put pressure on Pakistan to stop aiding and abetting terrorism and will continue to do so.

She said that a solution to the Kashmir problem would be found bilaterally within the framework of the Simla Agreement.

She said that it is in the interests of the United States that it is friendly to both India and Pakistan.

She believed that there should be continuous dialogue and interaction between India and her country.

She said that "on some issues we may differ, but we must have continuous dialogue to remove misunderstandings and misperceptions."

On the question of supply of F-16 combat aircraft to Pakistan, she said that the United States will not do anything which will hamper the security and stability of the sub-continent.

ICRC team

Reuter from Srinagar reports: The first Red Cross team to visit India's Jammu and Kashmir state was welcomed by thousands of slogan-shouting demonstrators on Wednesday and some people staged a strike, their leaders said.

A four-member team from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) held rare talks with pro-independence groups fighting Indian rule in the Himalayan region.

But the ICRC allowed into Kashmir for the first time by the Indian government to provide humanitarian relief, has maintained it was not interested in politics.

We do not want to be involved with any politics, Mianrad Studer, the ICRC's Delhi-based official, told Reuters, recently after India allowed the group to visit Kashmir.

"Our mandate is clearly to provide humanitarian relief. We do not have the same approach as human rights groups," he said.

Residents in Srinagar, summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, observed a strike called by Muslim militants, paralysing traffic and forcing the closure of shops and government offices.

Approval for the tour followed India's decision to allow four European ambassadors to

Off the Record

Clinton, Gore on hunger strike

WASHINGTON: President Clinton and Vice President AL Gore went on a day-long hunger strike Wednesday to help call attention to the problem of hunger in America and the world, reports Reuter.

"The fast was the brainchild of Tony Hall, an Ohio Democrat who chairs the congressional hunger caucus and centre. He talked Clinton and Gore into a day of fasting when he met them at the White House Wednesday.

Hall and 10 other members of the House of Representatives were taking part in a three-day fast to dramatise the fact that 35,000 people, around the world die each day of starvation.

The agriculture department says a record 27.4 million Americans depend on the US food stamp programme, according to March 1993 figures, and that 85 per cent of them are children, women or elderly.



Pigeon makes Li, Pope friends

LONDON: A racing pigeon that failed to find its way home to Somerset, southern England, from the south of France has turned up two years later in Beijing after a journey covering two continents, the Times reported Thursday, reports AFP.

William Pope, the pigeon's owner, was astonished to receive a letter from a pigeon fancier in Beijing who had traced him through the bird's ring number, reporting that the pigeon was safe and well.

Li Rur Yong, a member of the Chinese Carrier Pigeon Association, wrote to Pope: "I was extremely honoured to receive a male grey pigeon. The same hobby makes us friends. I do my best to take care of the pigeon while I wait to return this lovely pigeon. It has brought up several baby pigeons."

Pope has turned down Yong's offer to send the bird back, which would cost 300 pounds (450 dollars) in quarantine fees.

The bird had apparently made the mistake of turning east instead of north on release.

Mystery illness

HONG KONG: A young woman in eastern China's Jiangxi province has recently been cured of an eight-year illness which put her to sleep for days on end, it was reported Thursday, says AFP.

Zhang Juanliang was treated by doctors at the People's Hospital in Yingting City for the mystery illness which overtook her in 1985, the Hong Kong China news service said.

It said the illness struck Zhang several times a month, and she would sleep for anything between 10 days and her record 49 days without taking any food, before waking up as if nothing had happened.

Following the treatment, Zhang has not suffered any marathon sleeping spells for the past six months.

Clinton to meet American Indian leaders in April

WASHINGTON, Mar 24: President Clinton will meet with American Indian and Alaskan native tribal leaders at the White House next month, it was announced Wednesday, reports Reuter.

A White House statement said the April 29 session will be the first such meeting of all the 545 federally-recognised tribal leaders and a president in office. It said they would discuss domestic policy.

"I look forward to this historic meeting and to affirming our commitment to strengthening the nation-to-nation relationship we have with tribal governments," Clinton said in the statement.

It said the meeting would give tribal leaders the chance to hear directly from Clinton "about his administration's overall commitment to ensuring American Indian sovereignty" and how Clinton's policies affect American Indians.

Raphel goes to Nepal tomorrow

KATHMANDU, Mar 24: Assistant Secretary of State of the United States for South Asian Affairs Robin Lynn Raphel will visit Nepal from March 26 to 30, reports Xinhua.

Raphel will pay a courtesy call on Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala during her five-day visit to Nepal, according to a Foreign Ministry press release which is available here today.

She will also call on Home Minister Sheg Bahadur Deuba, Minister of State for Water Resources Laxman Prasad Chimire and other senior officials.

During her stay in Nepal, Raphel will visit the Arun-III hydro-electricity project site and the Bhutanese refugee camps in Japa of eastern Nepal.

Shokhin Russia's new DPM

MOSCOW, Mar 24: President Boris Yeltsin has promoted Economics Minister Alexander Shokhin to the additional post of Deputy Prime Minister, reports AP.

Shokhin's aide Vladimir Kuznetsov said the appointment was made on Wednesday and announced at Thursday's government session by Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin.

Shokhin is viewed as a reform figure in the government, which has become more conservative after the January departure of top reformers including Deputy Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar.

The appointment brings Shokhin to the level of four other deputy prime ministers



Moroccan Imam Mohammed Elidrissi, 65, head of the Lunel mosque, southern France, leaves the Gendarmerie station, where he was ordered to leave the country for disturbance to law and order. The expulsion order came after Elidrissi had called on worshippers—during Friday prayers—to fight Jewish and Christians. —AFP photo

Crisis grips Nepali Congress

KATHMANDU, Mar 24: The internal crisis within the ruling Nepali Congress (NC) is further deepened on Wednesday as the parliamentary session in both houses were interrupted, reports Xinhua.

In the National Assembly (upper house), NC MP Bidur Prasad Poudel demanded permission to table a delayed motion sparking a fierce argument and hindering the proceeding of the regular session in the upper house.

Poudel tabled the motion to demand adjournment of the session until the government secures vote of confidence in the parliament.

He stated it seemed that Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala lacks majority support in the lower house and the legality of the government has come under question.

Poudel's demand gave rise to a commotion in the meeting of the upper house as some strongly voiced their support while the others expressed their opposition to it.

Meanwhile in the House of Representatives' (lower house), some dissident NC MPs demanded the Prime Minister to resign or seek a vote of confidence.

MP Purna Bahadur Khadka of the Nepali Congress said that the Prime Minister should resign as the government does not enjoy the confidence of the parliament.

He also accused the government of violating the Constitution at different times such as plotting against the NC President Krishna Prasad Bhattarai in the by-election in February of this year and causing the president's defeat.

He demanded that it is necessary for the person enjoying the majority support in the house to become the Prime Minister, adding that Prime Minister Koirala does not enjoy that in the house.

However, Speaker of the House of Representatives Daman Nath Dhungana said that the parliament could not concentrate its activity on the internal wrangling of a particular party.

Right on Wednesday evening, it is learnt that talks had been held between Prime Minister Koirala and NC President Bhattarai at the Prime Minister's residence to defuse the current crisis within the ruling Nepali Congress.

US, PLO, Israel push hard to revive peace talks

JERUSALEM, Mar 24: US, Palestinian and Israeli diplomats pushed hard to revive peace talks suspended after the Hebron mosque massacre a month ago even as new violence raged that battered West Bank city, reports Reuter.

Israeli troops firing rockets blew up Arab apartment building in Hebron, killing at least four Muslim guerrillas during a two-day siege that ended on Wednesday, Israeli security sources said.

Five soldiers were wounded, army sources said. A pregnant Palestinian bystander was killed — the army said by guerrillas returning fire: The woman's husband blamed the army.

Crucial talks between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation restarted in Cairo. A Palestinian demand for international protection for the 110,000 Arabs in Hebron was on the agenda.

PLO head delegate Nabil Shaath, asked about the latest violence, said: "It is just more proof that we have got to do something much more to solve the problem of security."

"We are going to finish tomorrow and I hope we are going to accomplish an agreement," he added.

US Middle East envoy Dennis Ross came to Israel after talks in Damascus with Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad. Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon suspended peace talks as did the PLO after a Jewish settler shot dead about 30 Arabs in Hebron last month.

Agreement on implementing the first phase of a historic September peace deal between Israel and the PLO was near when the killing occurred.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin told Israel radio: "The peace staff headed by Dennis Ross announced the agreement of the Arab states to renew the negotiations in Washington

China to manufacture tanks in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Mar 24: China has agreed to manufacture battle tanks and armoured vehicles in Pakistan, as Pakistan's leadership vowed yesterday to match the defence capability of India, reports AFP.

Official sources said the two countries signed an agreement Tuesday to manufacture the next generation of the main MBT-2000 battle tank and 125 millimetre smooth bore tank gun.

The agreement was signed by Pakistani Defence Secretary Mazhar Raf and Tao Zing Zing, Executive Vice President of China's Norinco Group of Industries, Pakistan has already started building small aircraft with Chinese assistance.

Pakistan cannot remain oblivious of a rapid increase in the defence budget of India, President Farooq Ahmed Leghari said.

Addressing the Pakistan Day parade, attended by military delegations from China and Saudi Arabia, Leghari said given the lingering dispute with India over Kashmir, Pakistan was left with no option but to strengthen its defence.

Kashmir remains the stumbling block in Indo-Pakistan relations, he said of the northern region. India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir since gaining independence in 1947.

Relations have soured further during a four-year-old secessionist movement in the Indian-held part of the region, an insurgency New Delhi blames on Islamabad.

Pakistan denies charges of

Iraq close to destroying N-missiles

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 24: A senior UN official said Wednesday Iraq was close to destroying its nuclear, chemical and ballistic missiles, one key demand before Baghdad will be allowed to sell oil again, reports Reuter.

But Rolf Ekeus, head of the UN Special Commission in charge of disarming Iraq, would not give a timetable on what his inspectors still needed to do, estimated by some UN officials to take about another nine months.

Ekeus, after briefing Security Council members, said he was "close to answering yes, on whether all prohibited weapons had been identified and eliminated."

But he said his commission still needed to verify information on chemical weapons because Iraq had destroyed many key documents.

BRIEFLY

India denies link with confce: India on Wednesday clarified that there was no government involvement in a conference on Tibet organised by a group of parliamentarians last week, PTI reports from New Delhi.

If private citizens want to hold a seminar, they are free to do so, the spokesman said.

He was responding to criticism by China that the Indian government did not prevent the conference from being held in New Delhi. The spokesman, however, reiterated that India considered Tibet to be an autonomous region of China.

4 die in Brazilian plane crash: A Brazilian executive jet crashed near Bogota Wednesday, killing all four people on board, Colombia's Civil Aviation authority said, Reuter reports from Bogota.

The Cessna citation with Brazilian registration had received clearance to land at Bogota's El Dorado International Airport when it disappeared in the early afternoon, Civil Aviation Director Fernando Zarama said.

3 CIS members start jt exercise: Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on Wednesday started their joint military exercises with their collective peacekeeping forces in southern Tajikistan, the Itar-Tass news agency reported, Xinhua says from Moscow.

It is the first time that members of the CIS (the Commonwealth of Independent States) team security treaty have held joint military manoeuvres.

Kinnock to watch African polls: Neil Kinnock former leader of the Labour Party, is to head a British parliamentary mission to help supervise the South African elections next month, Reuter reports from London.

The British parliamentary groups organising the mission said on Wednesday that Kinnock would lead a 20-strong panel of politicians from Labour, the ruling Conservative Party and Ulster Unionist Party.

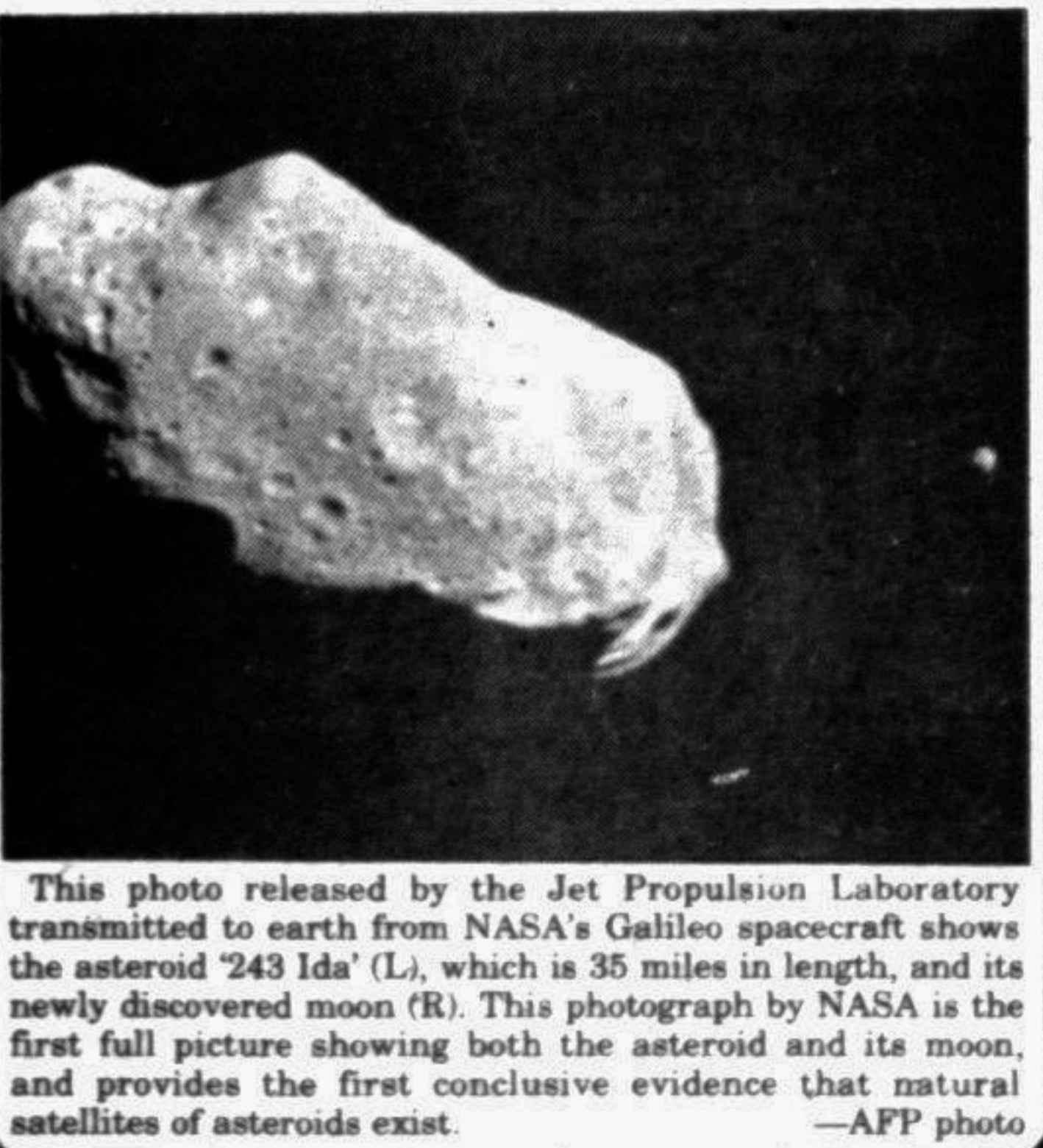
Landslip kills 18 in China: At least 18 people were killed and two seriously injured in a sudden landslide in southwestern China's Sichuan province, it was reported yesterday, AFP says from Hong Kong.

Several other people were slightly injured in the landslide which struck a village in Yibing region on Wednesday, the China news service was quoted by newspapers here as saying.

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This photo released by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory transmitted to earth from NASA's Galileo spacecraft shows the asteroid '243 Ida' (L), which is 35 miles in length, and its newly discovered moon (R). This photograph by NASA is the first full picture showing both the asteroid and its moon, and provides the first conclusive evidence that natural satellites of asteroids exist. —AFP photo

Sankardas Banerjee dead

CALCUTTA, Mar 24: Eminent lawyer and former Speaker of the West Bengal assembly, Sankardas Banerjee, died here late last night following a protracted illness, reports PTI.

He was 92 and is survived by three sons and a daughter.

Born in an illustrious family of Debagram in Nadia district, Banerjee joined the bar of the Calcutta High Court soon after completing Bar-at-Law from the Lincoln Inn in 1927. He was appointed standing counsel in 1950 and continued for the post for seven years.

In 1952, Banerjee joined the Indian National Congress and was elected a member of the West Bengal legislative council. He was subsequently elected to the state assembly from Tebetta constituency in his home district in 1957.

Aid workers leaving Somalia

MOGADISHU, Somalia, Mar 24: Somali workmen struggle with large sacks of American grain stacked nearly to the rafters in a warehouse on a Mogadishu pier. There are ample stockpiles for a new famine, but there are growing shortages of manpower, goodwill and patience, reports AP.

More and more relief workers have abandoned the country. Programme have been put on hold or stopped altogether. Donors have begun to fear Somalia and turn their attention elsewhere.

The last of the American and Western soldiers who made it safe to move the food from the ports to the people leave this week, and with them goes the confidence that kept the humanitarian mission afloat.

"If the Somalis do not guarantee us conditions in which we can work, then we are going to close down and go away," said Programme.

Unless Somalis end their factional fighting and build a government, the already teetering humanitarian effort will collapse, aid workers say.

Aid workers have been stockpiling food, rebuilding agriculture and opening schools since Somalia's famine ended last summer, after American troops waded ashore in December 1992.

"The impetus to stay is not as strong and that is perfectly understandable," said Kevin Kennedy, the UN deputy director for humanitarian affairs in Somalia. "Should someone risk their life for the canal rehabilitation project in the lower Shabelle Valley?"

There were always limitations on how much foreigners could accomplish in Somalia. With the withdrawal of the Western soldiers and equipment, aid workers say the restrictions are mounting.

The International Committee of the Red Cross spent 180 million dollars on its relief operation in Somalia last year, a third of its global budget. Suzanne Hofstetter, the agency's chief in Somalia, doubted donors would provide similar amounts if Somalia drives itself back into anarchy and famine.

"I'm not sure we could save Somalia a second time," said Ms Hofstetter. Kennedy estimated the United Nations has collected less than half of the 166 million dollars pledged for humanitarian aid in 1993. He said more than 300 million dollars has been spent on humanitarian efforts in the last 12 to 18 months.

"People on the streets in Europe and the United States are tired of Somalia. They feel they gave until it hurt and got nothing for it," said John Kilkenny, the Somalia director for the Irish aid group Concern.



As a man from Bosnian-controlled Sarajevo (left) walks into Serb-held Grbavica (right), the first person to leave Grbavica for the Bosnian sector both pass UN guard on the Bridge of Brotherhood and Unity on Wednesday. The visitor (C) was seeing his invalid son. They have been separated since the start of the war nearly two years ago. —AFP photo

Golden jubilee celebrations of Asian Resurgence Confce in '97

SANTINIKETAN (WB), Mar 24: Viswabarati would organise the golden jubilee celebrations of the Asian Resurgence Conference in 1997 remembering the first one held in 1947, just after the Indian independence, at the initiative of then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, reports PTI.

This proposal, moved by Mani Shankar Aiyer, MP, was unanimously passed at the annual general meeting of the Samsad (court) of the Viswabarati University on March 21 Aiyer came here to attend the meeting as a representative of the Lok Sabha.

The proposal was supported by Somnath Chatterjee who is also a member of the court representing Lok Sabha.