

US coming round to India's N-deterrence?

NEW DELHI, Dec 17: Initial US outrage over testing has evolved over the course of discussions with New Delhi into tacit acceptance of India's determination to build a nuclear defence, a senior diplomatic source said Thursday, reports AP.

The source, speaking on condition of anonymity, opened a window onto the ongoing talks on India's defence policy that followed India's May underground nuclear tests. Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee also provided some details this week in two speeches to lawmakers who had complained about the secrecy surrounding the discussions.

According to the diplomatic source, officials have given Vajpayee's envoy Jaswant Singh a tour of US facilities that provide direct communication between Washington and Moscow, and he has met with experts on "command and control" — the system that determines under what circumstances nuclear weapons would be used.

So even while questioning India's need for a nuclear arse-

nal, the United States has taken steps to help New Delhi manage it, the source said. It also has encouraged India to clearly define what it means by what Vajpayee calls a "minimum, credible nuclear deterrence," arguing that being open about its capabilities is the only way to persuade perceived enemies India has something to fear.

After the May tests that India declared established it as a nuclear power, Vajpayee said his country needed a deterrent because its uneasy neighbours China and Pakistan were nuclear capable. Pakistan responded to the tests conducted by its neighbour and arch-rival with its own underground explosions, raising fears nuclear war could one day break out in the region. India and Pakistan have fought three conventional wars since the two independent nations were carved out of the British empire in 1947.

Vajpayee told his parliament Tuesday that after six rounds of talks since May between Singh and US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Tal-

bott, the United States has developed "some understanding of our security concerns and requirements."

A seventh Singh-Talbott meeting is scheduled in late January in New Delhi. Singh was recently named foreign minister, raising questions as to whether he would continue direct talks with a lower-ranking US official. Plans for Singh to continue are a sign he and Talbott have developed a relationship considered crucial to the success of the talks.

It is unclear when the talks will be concluded, as the two sides remain far apart on key issues.

The United States wants India and Pakistan to sign an international test ban treaty, issue a formal moratorium on production of the fissile materials used to make nuclear weapons and adopt restraints on nuclear-capable missiles and aircraft.

Vajpayee has never clearly promised to sign the test ban treaty, but said again Tuesday he supports its coming into

force by September — the treaty as it is now written cannot come into force without India's signature. He also said India needs no more test explosions to refine its nuclear capability.

Vajpayee added in his speech to parliament that India could not unilaterally end fissile material production, but was participating in talks in Geneva aimed at establishing an international ban. He also said India "will not accept any restraints" on developing missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

Work on India's extended range Agni missile continued, he said. India also has a force of 20-50 nuclear-capable medium-range Prithvi missiles, according to the London defence journal Jane's Intelligence Review.

Washington lifted some anti-nuclear economic sanctions this month after India and Pakistan announced a moratorium on further testing and promised to adhere to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by September, as well to control the production and sale of nuclear materials.

Wedding in the clouds!

NEW DELHI, Dec 17: Zabin Abbas wanted his wedding to be different. So he took his bride up in a helicopter and tied the knot while relatives and friends cheered lustily from the ground below, reports IANS.

The Muslim 'nikaah' ceremony took place as the helicopter flew over Abbas' native village of Alipur in Karnataka state. Two priests took 20 minutes to conduct the ceremony while the entire village gathered below to cheer the couple.

"It is such an extraordinary feeling that words fail me," the Pioneer daily quoted Abbas, a trader in chillies, as saying on landing after the ceremony.

After receiving blessings from the villagers the newlyweds hopped back into the helicopter and headed for their honeymoon destination, a hotel in Bangalore.

Unique weddings seem to be a past time with Abbas family. Elder brother Mir Karim, also a chilly trader, got married last year on the back of an elephant. "Maybe, we are an ordinary people but we really want to live it up, at least on our wedding day which happens once in a lifetime," explained Abbas.

Strike call by Maoist rebels' supporters paralyse capital King rejects PM's call for early elections in Nepal

KATHMANDU, Dec 17: King Birendra on Thursday rejected the prime minister's recommendation to order early elections in the Himalayan state after he lost majority support in Parliament, reports AP.

King Birendra summoned Parliament next week that would give the opposition a chance to form an alternative government. The next general elections are due in November 1999.

Last week, Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala recommended dissolution of Parliament and fresh elections when all 13 ministers from the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of Nepal, his junior coalition partner, resigned from the government.

Simultaneously, 66 opposition lawmakers urged the king to call a special session of Parliament for a confidence vote.

The king, who returned home from London earlier this week after heart surgery to settle the political turmoil, accepted the opposition plea. Parliament will meet on Dec 25, said a

Royal Palace statement. The opposition is expected to move a no-confidence motion in Parliament. A debate will begin a week later, culminating in a vote.

A crisis engulfed the coalition government when the prime minister refused the communists' demand to include at least five communist members in the cabinet and appoint their supporters to head district administrations.

Another dispute related to the timing of the next general elections. Koirala wants an early election in April, while the Communists want balloting in November as scheduled.

Prime Minister Koirala's Nepali Congress controls 87 lawmakers in 205-seat House of Representatives, the lower house of parliament, and is dependent on other groups for survival.

The opposition needs 103 votes to topple Koirala from power. Nepal's second largest party, the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist), with 49 seats will play a

crucial role in deciding Koirala's fate.

A split verdict in the 1994 general elections produced unstable governments. Nepal has had five prime ministers in the past four years.

Another report adds: Schools, shops and businesses remained closed in the Nepalese capital Thursday in response to a general strike call by supporters of Maoist rebels who have been fighting a guerilla war since 1995.

Police detained 60 protesters. Life was paralysed as vehicles stayed off the road in Kathmandu, a city of 1.5 million people.

Support for the rebels' campaign is not widespread. The success of the strike is linked to fear of violence — two people were killed for defying a strike call in April.

The National People's Movement Coordination Committee, which has strong links with Maoist rebels, accused the government of "terrorising and murdering innocent people."



An Indian soldier takes water from a well on the international border line between India and Pakistan in Pansar, some 75-km south of Jammu, Wednesday. A civilian was killed recently by Pakistani firing at the same spot, which is now considered one of the most sensitive border areas in the Jammu region.

— AP/UNB photo

Advani says Demolition of Babri Mosque saddest day of my life

NEW DELHI, Dec 17: Indian Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani has admitted that the razing of a historic mosque in 1992 by Hindu radicals was a setback for both him and his party, a daily said today, reports AFP.

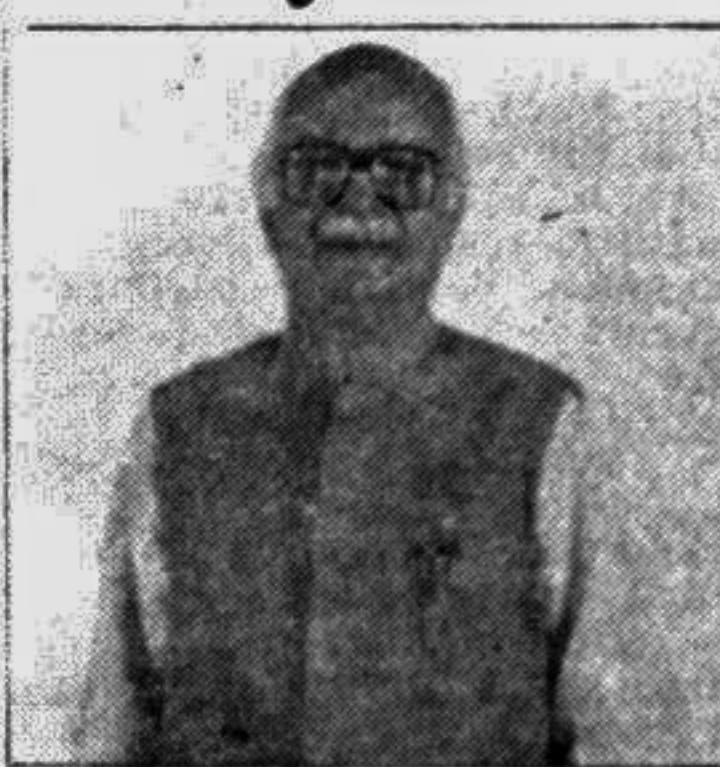
Advani was one of the prime backers of the movement to "liberate" the supposed birthplace of the Hindu god Rama in the northern town of Ayodhya, where a Muslim ruler had allegedly demolished a temple to build the mosque.

However, the minister expressed regret over the razing of the mosque which triggered the worst bout of sectarian violence in India since independence in 1947.

"It was unfortunate. It shouldn't have happened," the Asian Age daily quoted him as saying during a lecture here Wednesday.

"Personally it came as a jolt. It was also a jolt for my party and its cause."

Advani, considered one of the hardliners in his Hindu Nationalist Party, had spear-



L K Advani headed the drive against the mosque, touring India on a chariot until his arrest on charges of fanning religious discord.

Advani, however, said he was "proud" of the campaign as it was "a different idea."

He added in the same breath that the demolition turned out to be the most depressing day in his life. Others at the site were ecstatic, but I seldom felt as dejected and downcast.

MQM asks SC to suspend military courts in Sindh

ISLAMABAD, Dec 17: The Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which earlier challenged the validity of the military courts set up in Sindh province, has approached Pakistan's Supreme Court to seek their suspension. Sheikh Liaquat Hussain, MQM's leader in the National Assembly, told IANS that the party has filed a fresh application in the Supreme Court for the suspension of the military courts which started functioning in Karachi last month.

The federal government, under the Pakistan Armed Forces (Acting in Aid of the Civil Power) Ordinance 1998, had established 10 military courts of appeal in Sindh. The ordinance for establishing the courts under Article 245 was promulgated last month by President Rafiq Tarar. Hussain said, "The people of Sindh shall suffer irreparable loss and injury if the operation of the military courts in Sindh is not suspended."

He said the enforcement of Article 245 and invitation for help from the army in civil affairs have raised serious apprehensions regarding the real mo-

tive behind such a move. He said Article 245 is a draconian law that completely tramples human rights and many sections of the ordinance are blatant violations of fundamental rights guaranteed by other articles of the Constitution.

Criticising the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Hussain said the enforcement of Article 245 under a civil administration is a rare experiment detrimental to the civilian set-up as well as the judicial system. Moreover, he said, the manner in which it has been enforced is unique and extra-constitutional, equivalent to committing high treason.

"The concept of summary military courts without the umbrella of martial law is something never seen, heard or experimented with before," said the leader of MQM, which parted ways with the government some three months ago. "Let alone the establishment of a totally new parallel tier of judiciary, this act is also a blatant violation and a challenge to the independence of judiciary granted by various articles of the Constitution," Hussain said.

Accusing Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) of violating an agreement with the MQM, he said these "fascist tendencies demonstrate the wishful thinking of the rulers and how fast they are moving towards the establishment of one party-one man rule."

He alleged the real motive behind the measures was to crush the MQM. "The actions taken so far and the subsequent orders since the enforcement of Governor's Rule on October 30, 1998, including the enforcement of Article 245 within 20 days, clearly pin-point the intentions of the perpetrators," he claimed.

Hussain claimed that while the PML's stated objective was to "separate crime and terrorism from politics" even as it said "no political party or group is the target," ground realities showed that state authorities were targeting the MQM.

"The same story of registration of false and fabricated cases, persecution and repressive measures like seize and search operations, raids and arrests, including the latest attack on Nine-Zero, residence of MQM chief Altaf Hussain, are being repeated," he said. — IANS

able in India as it is in the West, she said.

Many Hijras embrace Islam, attracted by its relative casteless egalitarianism, and take only one name to signify their rejection of caste and family. They celebrate all religious festivals. Their rites, which involve dancing and playing drums, follow an ancient custom predating the British Raj which was outlawed during colonial rule. Hijras are a community, a family, a religion, where young initiates are taught centuries of ritual through the classic guru/chela (teacher/student) relationship. Between 750,000 and a million Hijras live in India. Ogborn claimed. Such an exotic group is bound to fall prey to popular misconceptions here in the West; some say Hijras include cross-dressers and homosexuals in search of community, but Ogborn disputed that.

"In India there's some status attached to being a Hijra, rather than a cross-dresser, so lots of cross-dressers claim to be Hijras. But there is a real Hijra community and we don't admit cross-dressers," she said. On the popular misconception that Hijras kidnap boys, initiating them into the group by mutilation, Ogborn said, "They're not monsters!"

Of the thousands of Hijras she's met in India, she said, "I haven't met anybody who has committed or undergone that practice."

Purulia arms case Latvia to ask India to extradite 2 suspects

RIGA, Dec 17: The Latvian government will ask India to extradite two of the five pilots held in prison in that country for three years on suspicion of involvement in the Purulia arms drop case, reports IANS.

Latvian Foreign Ministry Deputy Secretary of State Janis Karklins said Monday that a letter to the effect addressed to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is to be given to the Indian Ambassador, resident in Stockholm, by December 22. Karklins had visited India last week to check on the condition of the pilots, who are legal residents of that country though not its citizens. The five aviators are accused of dropping arms from an aircraft over Purulia, West Bengal, in December 1995.

The Latvian government will ask for extradition on humanitarian grounds of Igor Moskovitin, who has tuberculosis, and Evgeny Antunenko, who recently suffered a heart attack during a court hearing. Karklins said the jailed pilots intended to start a hunger protest on December 22 and he had failed to persuade them to change their mind.

CPI (M) elects new politburo

NEW DELHI, Dec 17: CPI (M) central committee today unanimously elected the party's new 17-member politburo by inducting six new leaders and retaining veterans, including Harkishan Singh Surjeet, Jyoti Basu, EK Nayanan and Sallen Dasgupta, reports PTI.

New faces in the politburo are Tripura Chief Minister Manik Sarkar, West Bengal state unit secretary Anil Biswas, his senior colleague Biman Basu, city general secretary MK Pande, new secretary of Kerala unit Pinarayi Vijayan and veteran leader from Andhra Pradesh M Hanumantha Rao.

Lankan-US ties strain over commercial venture

By Sugueswara Senadhira

COLOMBO: Sri Lankan cabinet ministers have refused to approve a finance ministry proposal to pay off Rs. 250 million (\$3.7 million) as compensation to an American company for cancellation of a contract.

When the proposal to pay the amount to Evans International of US was placed before it, the cabinet asked why approval was not sought before awarding the contract to the American company last year.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who holds the finance portfolio, said the payment will have to be made in the interest of Sri Lanka-US relations. She said the Attorney General would be called to the next cabinet meeting to explain the legal implications of the issue.

The cancellation of the contract led to strong expression of displeasure by the US at the highest level. On April 28, 1997, in a letter to Kumaratunga, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright issued a veiled threat that the cancellation would affect future American investments in Sri Lanka.

After the devastating 1996

Tamil terrorist attack in the economic heart of Colombo, which destroyed the Central Bank and damaged a number of buildings including two five star hotels as well as local and foreign banks, the government prepared a blueprint for rebuilding the economic centre of Colombo. To implement the project, a state-owned company named Centrepoint was floated and a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed with Evans International.

But in January 1997, the government decided not to go ahead with the project with Evans International as a partner. Then US Ambassador Peter Burleigh sent a few protest notes, but the government refused to change its stand. This led to direct intervention by Albright who wrote to Kumaratunga that Washington considered this an important issue.

"Failure to follow through now with a comprehensive reconstruction project will inevitably raise questions among foreign investors and governments regarding Sri Lanka's commitment to building a strong economic future," Alb-

bright said in her letter. "This will slow Sri Lanka's drive to become an important economic and finance centre in the region."

Kumaratunga replied that the government decided to drop the project as the companies that had been affected by the bomb blast found alternate resources for reconstruction of their destroyed or damaged buildings.

Subsequently Evans International Managing Director Chris Baylis wrote to Kumaratunga asking her to make good on the agreement with the firm. A notice of demand through a Colombo-based legal firm followed. The finance ministry, after studying the matter, decided that compensation would have to be paid to Evans International and after discussions a sum of \$3.7 million was decided upon.

"Although the cabinet delayed the sanction, it is expected to authorise payments after the briefing by the Attorney General at the next cabinet meeting," a finance ministry official said.

— IANS

Transsexuals seek transborder understanding

By Lisa Tsering

Oakland, California: In what is being described in the American community of cross-dressers as a "historic event," three Indian Hijras (eunuchs) will travel to the U.S. later this month to meet transsexuals in that country.

Sheila Hajji, 'nauk' (head) of the Hijra house of Najafgarh in New Delhi, Hasina Hajji, 'chela' (student) of Sheila Hajji, and Dolly Hijra, also of the house of Najafgarh will relate their social experiences to Americans during their trip. The three Indians will visit Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area and Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, where they will meet scholars. Their visit, being organised by the Sampark (Connection) Project, is sponsored in part by Yale University, and TriKone (Triangle), an organisation of South Asian gays and lesbians in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Ann Ogborn, the main organiser of the visit, is an American transsexual who has visited India three times to live with and study the Hijras. "This meeting between Western transsexuals and Asian Hijras will bring the social history of the two together. This is an exciting historical event," she told the California newspaper India West. Transgendered people, especially transsexuals, in the West have only 100 years of or-

ganised history, while the Hijras of India have closer to 1,000 years, said Candice Hellen Brown of the TransHistory Project.

A Bay Area software engineer who has been living as a woman since 1986, Ogborn taught herself Hindi and was accepted into the Hijra community, travelling in India as one of them. Her fair skin and American looks set her apart at the beginning, but she now fits right in with the colourful crew, she claimed.

The Hijras share a centuries-old religious and social place in India, and perform blessings at weddings and births. But, people ask, are they really blessing the babies, or extorting bribes from superstitious parents? Are they invited, or do they just crash the party? Ogborn laughed. "Well, we show up at the gates; it's part of the custom that people act semi-tolerant that we're there," she said. "It's an old custom we claim as religious duty."

The Hijras support themselves by asking for donations, which vary widely from place to place. "We ask more from members of Parliament than from people living in 'jhuggis' (slums)," she said. "A variety of reasons can lead a young man to become a Hijra and a very small number have been known to castrate themselves since sex change surgery is not as widely avail-

able in India as it is in the West, she said.

Many Hijras embrace Islam, attracted by its relative casteless egalitarianism, and take only one name to signify their rejection of caste and family. They celebrate all religious festivals. Their rites, which involve dancing and playing drums, follow an ancient custom predating the British Raj which was outlawed during colonial rule. Hijras are a community, a family, a religion, where young initiates are taught centuries of ritual through the classic guru/chela (teacher/student) relationship. Between 750,000 and a million Hijras live in India. Ogborn claimed. Such an exotic group is bound to fall prey to popular misconceptions here in the West; some say Hijras include cross-dressers and homosexuals in search of community, but Ogborn disputed that.

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'Fire' rages controversy in India

By Rupa Chatterjee

NEW DELHI, Dec 17: The flames of controversy leaping around 'Fire' have little to do with the film itself but everything to do with the right to freedom of expression in a democracy, according to Shabana Azmi, who played a lead role in the movie.

"I don't think the issue is 'Fire' at all," Shabana, award-winning actress-turned-activist, told India Abroad News Service. "It is something much larger — the question of freedom of expression."

The film by Deepa Mehta has run into trouble for the depiction of a lesbian relationship between two sisters-in-law living in a traditional Hindu joint family. While the filmmaker has repeatedly said that 'Fire' is not about lesbianism but about respect for choices others make, hardliners in Hindu chauvinist parties say the depiction of the homosexual relationship denigrates Indian women.

"The seed (for a movement against cultural policing) has been planted," Shabana said, pointing to the howl of protest following attacks by members of the Shiv Sena party on movie theatres screening 'Fire' in Mumbai and Delhi. "People are very stirred," she said.

There have been lots of spontaneous protests (against the attacks) across the country," Shabana, who is also a member of the Rajya Sabha — the Upper

House of Parliament — noted. "There has been an overwhelming public demand" that such attempts at curbing free thought and expression be stopped.

She said even though she did not immediately have plans to launch a campaign against the assault on freedom of expression, she was sure other like-minded people would make sure cultural policing by Shiv Sena and similar political groups comes to an end.

In an editorial page article today in The Times of India titled 'Freedom Under Fire', Shabana wrote: "The question is not whether 'Fire' is a good film or a bad film. The question is who will decide this. The people or the Shiv Sena?" "Fire" is a film that disturbs...that starts a process of questioning," she wrote. "You are free not to agree with the film. You are free not to consider it worthy of the 14 International awards it has won. You are free to protest. The right to dissent is the hallmark of democracy."

Shabana called the tirade against 'the country's most respected actor and socially responsible citizen' Dilip Kumar, one of the artists to have petitioned the Supreme Court to ensure uninterrupted screenings of 'Fire', by a Shiv Sena parliamentarian "deplorable."

Sanjay Nirupam, a Rajya Sabha member who belongs to the Shiv Sena, called Dilip Ku-

mar a staunch Muslim and therefore a Pakistani. Shabana wrote that the remark was "an insult not only to the actor (whose real name is Yusuf Khan) but to the whole nation."

She added, "To insinuate that a true Muslim cannot be a true Indian hurts the sentiments of not only millions of Muslims in the country but also every citizen of India."

Empathy is the larger issue raised by 'Fire', she said. "Fire" says that when you come across people who make choices different from yours, you must empathise with them, not condemn them," Azmi wrote. "If you can empathise with the two women in 'Fire', you may be able to extend the empathy to the 'other' gender, the 'other' religion, the 'other' nationality, the 'other' race." She also slammed attempts by the Shiv Sena to put a religious colour to the controversy by saying the depiction of the lesbian relationship within a Hindu family was objectionable. "There are no takers for the Shiv Sena's claim to be a morality brigade in a spot," she wrote. "It has to shift focus away from the main issue. And hence its attempt to criminalise it."

Filmmaker Mehta had written in a response to Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray: "The majority of films made in India are set in Hindu households.

Besides, I am a Hindu and the particular milieu of 'Fire' is a milieu with which I am familiar and feel comfortable portraying."

The controversy over the movie is also reported to be causing a rift within the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which heads the federal coalition.



Hardliners attacked movie theatres screening 'Fire'.

tion and is an alliance partner of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra state. Party hardliners are said to favour a ban on 'Fire' while the moderates oppose the idea. The Statesman newspaper said in a front page report to-

day.

It said hardliners like Home (Interior) Minister L.K. Advani and BJP president Kushabhau Thakre object to the depiction of the lesbian relationship while moderates close to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee find nothing objectionable in the film. Advani, while condemning the attacks on movie theatres screening 'Fire', had reportedly said "projection of such a relationship, which does not conform with the Indian culture, also should not be justified."

Junior Minister for Information and Broadcasting Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, asked whether a ban was likely, said while his ministry was waiting for a reappraisal from the censors, "projection of such relationship must not be allowed in the country" as it "denigrated Indian women."

Officials in the ministry were quoted as saying that the censors cleared the Hindi version of the film in a hurry "because of the friendship between Azmi and former Information and Broadcasting Minister Sushma Swaraaj."

Even Thackeray had alleged that while censors take at least two weeks to clear most films, 'Fire' got the go-ahead in a matter of days because of the Azmi-Swaraj friendship. — IANS