

Mamata vows to mobilise all forces against CPI-M

CALCUTTA, Dec 20: The Trinamool Congress leader, Mamata Banerjee, yesterday took the ruling BJP-led coalition to task for its 'failure' to take action against the state's Left Front government on various charges of corruption and scams and said that the 'weak centre is busy defending itself,' reports PTI.

Announcing that her agenda for the coming year would be to mobilise all forces opposed to the CPI-M to fight the ruling Marxists, the firebrand leader told newsmen that she would contact all anti-CPI-M parties, including some left parties, who were not happy with the CPI-M for the purpose.

The Trinamool Congress, she said, would set its agenda at the public rally at the Brigade Parade Ground which has been

deferred to February 17 from January 28 due to Republic Day preparations.

She said that after the current session of parliament she would talk to the Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, regarding law and order in West Bengal besides implementation of the Bengal package.

In an effort to increase bargaining power with the Vajpeyi government, Banerjee, meanwhile, roped in two more parties — Arunachal Congress and Haryana Lokdals — to the 'Progress Alliance' formed by her.

Confirming that she had talks with the Arunachal Congress and the Haryana Lokdals of Om Prakash Chautala, Banerjee today said that the second meeting of the alliance would take place in New Delhi on December 22.

China sends detained ailing dissident into exile

BEIJING, Dec 20: China released an ailing labour rights campaigner from a prison work camp on Sunday and immediately sent him into exile in the United States, a human rights group reported, says AP.

Liu Nianchun's release contrasted with a relentless three-week-old crackdown against dissidents trying to form an opposition political party. A third leading organiser of the China Democracy Party and the group's most prominent leader, Xu Wenli, goes on trial for subversion Monday.

Liu was taken from the Tuanhe labour camp on the outskirts of Beijing, driven to the capital's airport and put on a Northwest Airlines flight, the Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China reported. It added that he was ultimately headed for New York.

Authorities released Liu exactly six months before the end of his prison term but made his

freedom conditional on his going into exile, the Hong Kong-based group reported.

Liu was one of the most respected figures in China's fractured, persecuted dissident community. His more than 3 and a half years in prisons and labour camps was a sad illustration of the way China's Communist Party rulers punish people they deem a threat.

Liu was imprisoned at three times in the past 17 years. His last arrest came after he signed a petition calling for labour rights in May 1995. Liu was never put on trial. Fourteen months passed before his wife, Chu Hailan, first learned of his whereabouts: a labour camp in the frigid, far northeast.

His wife tirelessly campaigned for his release. Chu was dragged away and hit by security forces when she tried to hand a letter to UN human rights chief Mary Robinson outside a Beijing hotel in September.

Infidelity, scandals reign US politics

WASHINGTON, Dec 20: America's capital is afire with scandal and its aftershocks. Clinton, Gingrich, Hyde, now Livingston — the toll seemingly mounts by the day, reports AP.

What one Democrat called "sexual McCarthyism" is bringing official Washington to its knees.

Rep Bob Livingston shocked the House on Saturday by announcing he would not accept the speakership after admitting two days earlier to extramarital affairs.

One confessed sinner to another, he urged Bill Clinton to resign as president.

"I must set the example that I hope President Clinton will follow," he said in a startling aside to a debate that ended with Clinton's impeachment.

Livingston's example is one that few politicians wanted set.

"No one standing in this House today can pass a puritanical test of purity that some are demanding that our elected leaders take," House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt of Missouri said after Livingston's remarks.

"If we demand that mere mortals live up to this standard, we will see our seats of government lay empty."

United on this point, the whole House applauded his remarks.

Livingston was the latest casualty of a yearlong purge rooted in Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky. The long-running scandal is snuffing out careers and ambitions in head-spinning fashion.

House Judiciary Chairman Henry Hyde, charged with prosecuting the case against Clinton, was forced in September to admit to an affair dating to the 1960s.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich announced his resignation shortly after Livingston's remarks. "If we demand that mere mortals live up to this standard, we will see our seats of government lay empty."

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It is not an enabling time," lamented Thomas Mann, director of governmental studies at the Brookings Institution. "We never been so ashamed of our national political leaders, and never so saddened by the behavior of the Congress."

One senior White House official gladly left town for the holidays. "I expect to look through my rear view mirror and see black plumes of smoke rising from the ashes," the official said.

Washington powerbrokers have long fed on each others' troubles, if not always in this dramatic fashion.

If only Livingston could say the same thing.

One after another, Democrats and Republicans alike urged the Louisiana lawmaker to reconsider his decision. Quitting now would be a concession to what Gephardt called "the politics of slash and burn."

Democrats had extra incentive to protest: They're trying to stifle calls for Clinton's resignation.

The Senate narrowly con-

firmed Clarence Thomas for the Supreme Court in 1991, but only after hearings over sexual harassment allegations that he equated to "a high-tech lynching."

Gary Hart dropped out of the 1988 presidential race, refusing to confirm whether he had an affair with Donna Rice.

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It was left to Hyde, the silver-haired Clinton nemesis, who summed up the day and this era the best. "My friends," he said from the well of the House, "those of us who are sinners must feel especially wretched today."

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