

Anti-terrorism law sails thru' joint Indian parliament

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The Indian Parliament has, at a rare joint sitting of its two Houses, given its seal of approval to the controversial new tough anti-terrorism law after a marathon debate marked by a bitter of words between the ruling BJP-led alliance and the Opposition.

That the Prevention of Terrorism Bill, 2002, was passed Tuesday night by 425 votes for and 296 against by members of Lok Sabha (Lower House) and Rajya Sabha (upper house) was more or less predictable as was the debate along expected partisan lines.

The joint sitting -- only the third instance in Indian Parliamentary history after 1961 and 1978 -- as necessitated after the bill was endorsed by Lok Sabha, where BJP-led alliance has majority, but rejected by Rajya Sabha where the opposition enjoys the edge in numbers.

The day-long debate on the bill was enlivened by a spirited speech by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee towards the end when he made an intervention primarily because of his firm rebuttal of the charges made by Leader of the Opposition Sonia Gandhi who led the opposition charge against the

bill.

The new anti-terrorism law provides capital punishment for terrorist killings, empowers police to detain a person for 90 days without trial and special courts to handle terrorism cases.

BJP's ally Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee abstained from the joint sitting and AIADMK led by actress-turned-politician Jayalalitha and Nationalist Congress Party of Sharad Pawar were among the parties outside the ruling combine fold to support the bill.

Opposing the bill for its "anti-democratic" features, Sonia Gandhi said "time has come for Vajpayee to decide if his primary duty was to safeguard people's welfare or succumb to internal pressures of his party and its sister organizations."

"Will he (Vajpayee) be submissive and weak in his leadership or will be uphold the prestige of the high office he holds. His moment of reckoning has come," she said in an equally spirited attack on the bill.

Stating that the bill was aimed at fulfilling "narrow political ends and subverting the very spirit of the Constitution," Gandhi said the measure was aimed at "suppressing" political rivals and religious

minorities and "overlooks the basic human rights of individuals." The measure, she added, posed "a larger threat" to the freedom of ordinary people "than to terrorists."

Vajpayee, in a brief intervention at the flag-end of the debate, launched a scathing counter-attack on Gandhi. His speech reflected a sense of hurt as well as anger, unusual of the veteran parliamentarian of more than four decades.

Referring to Sonia Gandhi's allegation that he was working under pressure from RSS and its affiliates bodies, Vajpayee said "This is wrong. I do not work under pressure from anyone. My parliamentary career is an ample testimony to this."

Vajpayee said he is not holding the office of Prime Minister courtesy Congress but despite its opposition. "People want me and I will remain Prime Minister till they want," he said questioning the words used by the Leader of the Opposition in her prepared speech.

Beside Gandhi, other opposition leaders including Somnath Chatterjee of CPI(M) and Samajwadi Party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav said the bill could be misused as was being done "selectively" in Gujarat state "evoking fear among minorities."

Gold worth Tk 58.80 lakh seized at ZIA

UNB, Dhaka

Customs officials seized 840 tolas of gold worth about Tk 58.80 lakh from a security guard at the Zia International Airport on Monday.

Police said the customs officials challenged Aminul Islam for his suspicious movement and recovered 84 gold bars, after searching his body at about 7 am.

Aminul was handed over to police. A case was filed.

DCC polls

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BNP sources said there are more than one BNP candidate in almost all the wards, which has made it all the more difficult to extend party blessing to aspirants.

They said Jamaat has already been allowed to field its candidates in five wards -- 4, 13, 36, 59 and 87. But it has demanded 15 more.

Talking to The Daily Star, city BNP President and mayor candidate Sadeque Hossain Khoka said the party has already finalised nominations for about 75 wards and expects finalise the remaining ones before March 30, the last date for withdrawal.

Replying to a question, he said the BNP has prepared a list of 23 identified terrorists, who have submitted nomination papers. "It is out of question to nominate any of the 23. We will not give nomination to any terrorist," he added.

Khoka however said the Awami League government had implicated a number of candidates in various politically motivated cases.

As a case in point, he said the previous government filed over 100 cases against Mohammad Mohon of Old Dhaka and claimed 'all these cases were politically motivated'.

"I was also implicated in 146 cases, including seven for murder, during the Awami League regime. But am I a terrorist?" he asked.

Shahriar

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Procedure Code (CrPC). Police failed to file any specific case against Shahriar till December 7 last year.

But Mohammad Shahadat Hossain, officer-in-charge (OC) of Airport Police Station, filed a sedition case against Shahriar Kabir with the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court, Dhaka on December 8 last year.

He was granted ad-interim bail for six months by the High Court on January 20.

Hasina, UK envoy

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ment-opposition parley before the bill was passed and other contemporary domestic political developments also came up for discussion, sources said.

The AL said despite repeated urge the government neither withdrew the bill nor did it adjourn the session on March 21, the day the parliament passed the controversial bill.

AL lawmaker Kazi Zafarullah, who was a key person in the March 21 government-opposition parley, was also present during the meeting between Hasina and Carter.

These issues apart, during the hour-long meeting Hasina and Carter also discussed matters of mutual interests such as economic cooperation between the two countries and the interests of Bangladeshi expatriates in the UK.

British envoy appreciated Bangladesh's economic development during the five-year rule of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina and six former AL ministers along with around 40 former and serving bureaucrats and businessmen. Never in the country's history have so many bureaucrats been implicated together in graft cases.

On January 8, BAC filed six cases against three former AL ministers and some bureaucrats. Again on March 2, it filed two cases against an adviser to Sheikh Hasina, and 12 bureaucrats and businessmen.

Intelligence outfits

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