



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

UNION home minister P. Chidambaram has acted with honour and integrity and set an example by offering to resign after the massacre of 76 security men by Maoists in Dantewada in Chhattisgarh last week. By his action, PC has set a precedent for his colleagues. More important, he has consolidated his position within the government hierarchy. The Congress "appreciated and commended" his "buck stops at my desk" statement but would not go beyond saying that the resignation would not be accepted.

What came as a surprise though was the reaction of the opposition BJP which would normally have used an occasion such as this to go for the government's jugular. "We have not sought Chidambaram's resignation or want him to resign on his own. He has to continue the country's fight to the finish and our party would extend (the) support he needs to defeat the forces backed by foreign states", BJP spokesman Rajiv Pratap Rudy said. These are words that Rudy couldn't have afforded not to utter. Chidambaram succeeded the effete Shivraj Patil as Union home minister in the wake of 26/11 and since then there is a near cross-party consensus that the lawyer-economist-politician from Sivaganga is the best CEO for India's law and order machinery. That India did not witness a single case of terrorism for the next 14 months is testimony to that. The spotless record was somewhat blemished by the attack on the German Bakery in Pune in February this year; yet there is acknowledgement of the broad success of his strategy to snuff out threats from across the border. Indeed, so convinced was PC about the success of the path he chose that just a couple of weeks ago, he stated in an interview that he would wipe out the Maoist menace within the next three years.

Why then has he offered to resign? Has he thrown in the towel? I hope not, just as I am sure do a majority of our countrymen. At a time when the vandals rule a third of the country's 600-odd districts, India needs a man like him who carries no ideological baggage, has chalked out a clear agenda and goes about it with clockwork precision. PC uses both the carrot and the stick in equal measure. In the last few weeks, on more than one occasion he signalled the government's willingness to open dialogue as long as they "abjured" violence. Like any tough administrator who sets out to change the rules of the game, PC has run into hurdles. There is no shortage of bleeding hearts within and outside the government who'd rather that the state go soft on Maoists and adopt a two-pronged strategy that includes both carrying out anti-extremist operations and addressing their socio-economic issues.

It is PC's contention that, far from yielding results, this strategy has proved costly, both in

terms of men and material. Since 2005, 1,800 paramilitary personnel have met their death at the hands of extremists; 140 in the last months alone. PC has probably taken a cue from Y.S. Rajashekhara Reddy and N. Chandrababu Naidu, two men who otherwise followed policies that were as different as chalk and cheese. But on Naxalites, they — one a Congress chief minister and the other from the Telugu Desam Party and the bitterest of political rivals — were one. They were ruthless in their pursuit of Naxalites and both had the full support of the Centre. It is no secret that during the NDA regime, Naidu had a carte blanche from the then home minister L.K. Advani to act as he

deemed fit and it is largely due to their tenacity that the Naxalite menace in Andhra is no more what it used to be.

PC tried to establish the same kind of rapport with opposition chief ministers like Raman Singh and Naveen Patnaik. But he is being held back by the breast beaters in the government and professional human rights protesters. There was no sight more shameful than one such organisation claiming last week that the jawans were ill-trained to tackle extremism. It is not about lack of training. What they need are weapons and most of all, a morale booster. And that can only happen if the state empowers them with both weapons and policies that make them feel that

the state cares. For a start, politicians could start thinking beyond the vote bank and give them powers for preventive arrest and interrogation and even POTA. Give them autonomy; their demoralisation will vanish as will their death count. As finance minister, PC had greater exposure and influence over the nation's destiny. He missed the global stage and initially found it difficult to adjust to his new role in North Block. He had just begun to assert himself when Dantewada happened. He enjoys the confidence of both the PM and Sonia and by offering to resign, he stooped to conquer. He is indispensable now and his foes will think twice before engaging him in a bout.

Emerging stronger



R.PRASAD

MPs ready to get more salary, perks

NOT many outside the privileged group share the feeling, but our honourable MPs believe they are a very hard-working lot and therefore should be paid a lot more than they now earn. Sometime later this month, the Rajya Sabha and the Lok Sabha will witness rare unanimity when MPs cutting across party lines join hands to pass a resolution — moved by a committee comprising their own — that recommends a substantial hike in their salary and perks.

Currently, an MP's salary and perks add up to about Rs 65,000 a month. Besides, he/she gets free travel on both Indian Railways and business class by air, constituency allowance, daily allowance for signing the Parliament roster, free electricity and phone, office and secretarial allowances, etc. All these add up to an amount that could make

Also want allowance for domestic helps

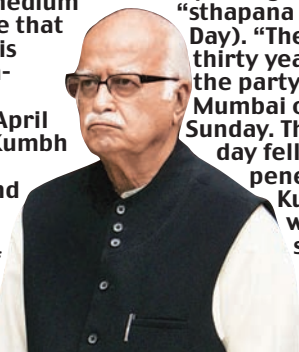
many whiz kids working in top MNCs green with envy. It is customary for MPs to vote themselves higher pay and attractive perks. This time, they have done one better. They are demanding a better standard of living not only for themselves but for their children and even their servants.

While MPs are now entitled to 40 trips a year to New Delhi from their constituencies with their wives or personal assistants, there is a move to extend 12 free trips by air (six two-way tickets to New Delhi and back) for dependent children. What's more, they are even seeking allowances for the domestic help that most of them bring along to Delhi. There are minor differences within the committee on the last one. I am told that Punjab and Haryana assemblies have already shown the way and I have no doubt that before the current session ends, the MPs would have voted for themselves another round of freebies.

THE brilliant ideas that L.K. Advani hatches in his mind never cease to amaze. Now that there is a new and younger team at the party's helm, the writer in him — remember he began his career as a film critic — seems to have resurfaced. While the party that he once headed pursues issues that belong to an era long bygone, the tech savvy leader used the worldwide web to reach his thoughts to the world. It is not the medium he uses, but the message that he seeks to convey that is pushing eyebrows northwards.

Last Easter weekend (April 2-4), Advani was at the Kumbh in Haridwar where he joined the Dalai Lama and thousands of sadhus, saints and assorted scholars on the banks of the Ganges and took a

L.K. Advani



Advani sees in BJP's history an echo of Christian events

pledge to make the holy river pollution-free. On his return to the capital, he sat down on his comp and pounded out a few stray thoughts on his blog titled "sthapana divas" (Foundation Day). "The party is exactly thirty years old today. In 1980, the party was launched in Mumbai on April 6, Easter Sunday. This year Easter Sunday fell on April 4. I happened to be at the Kumbh in Haridwar where one of the speakers was Father Dominic Emanuel. He casually mentioned that this function

was being held on the eve of Easter. That gave me an opening to recall how both the Christian festivals of the week, Good Friday and Easter, had significance even for the BJP's history. Good Friday is the day on which Jesus Christ was crucified. Easter Sunday is the day of Christ's resurrection. And the launching of the BJP on Easter Sunday was certainly our 'resurrection'."

I spoke with many senior BJP leaders, none of whom could figure out the import of Advani's jottings. Is he turning over a new leaf? Or is it that he wants to end his career just the way he had begun it — as a writer?

THE Prime Minister is off to Washington and among the many knotty issues that will accompany him is this one: Who will take over from K.M. Chandrashekar as the new cabinet secretary two months from now? The options: Sudha Pillai or M. Ramachandran, both from the 1972 batch. Sudha from the Kerala cadre is the senior most and her elevation means another glass ceiling broken as she will become the first woman head of the civil services.

But there is a hitch. Sudha is due to retire at the end of the month and in case she has to be accommodated as the first woman cabinet secretary, the government will have to appoint her as officer on special duty in the cabinet secretariat with an extension of her tenure in the cadre beyond May 1, 2010. But since this contravenes rules, the only option is to grant her an extension of two years. The other option is to make her a member secretary of the Planning Commission which gives her the status of minister of state, but I gather she is not keen to accept this. A more attractive option for her seems to be the Union Public Service Commission. Sudha is one of those who doesn't have to chase post-retirement jobs. The jobs chase her.