

Power & Politics

PRABHU CHAWLA

I'LL PUT it as diplomatically as possible. At the best of times, our foreign office has been a bundle of contradictions. Warring ministers, mandarins working at cross purposes and lesser minions have carried on their many private battles for so long that disorder and chaos have become the hallmark of South Block. And now, us confused *desis* are confounded by the contradictory statements emanating from the ministry of external affairs. For once, Shashi Tharoor is absolved of any misdemeanour though he continues to keep the twittering classes engrossed with daily 140 character outpourings.

A Fulbright scholar, former chief minister and governor, S.M. Krishna is probably more qualified than anyone else in the current UPA dispensation to head the sensitive external affairs ministry. But perhaps, caught short of breath after another round of sparring over visa norms with his much younger ministerial colleague, the 78-year-old's reflexes seem to be failing him. The official dithering that followed the killing of a 21-year-old Delhi boy in Melbourne led to much hype being built in the media, especially in TV studios where one anchor just stopped short of suggesting that India should dispatch the *INS Viraat* to the southern ocean to teach the Aussies a lesson.



Peter Varghese

For a full two days after young Nitin Garg was fatally stabbed, the minister's sole response to persistent questioning was "I can comment only after getting first hand information from our high commissioner". In New Delhi's refusal to comment, the Australians saw an opportunity. Its officials were so much in denial that they had the word "insensitivity" written all over their faces. Foreign minister Simon Crean said "such incidents happen not only in Melbourne but in Mumbai and Delhi too". God forbid such a thing happening, but if an Australian girl gets mugged or worse on the beaches of Goa, will Krishna turn around and tell Crean that "such incidents happen on Bondi Beach also". No.

The Australian high commissioner in New Delhi, the Indian-origin Peter Varghese's credentials as a diplomat should be questioned for his public display of impotence for saying that his government "will not be able to give any guarantee that such crimes can be stopped". Perhaps the most sensible statement to emerge out of this dirty and continuing tit-for-tat came from our foreign minister. "One can understand Indian students going to Australia at the university level, at the IIT level or other institutions of excellence, but when I went there I was shocked to see so many students attending courses in hair-styling and doing facials".

A friend of mine who did a stint

at our mission in Canberra some time back told me precisely this a few months ago when the attacks on Indians first began. According to him, four out of five Indian students pay through their noses and go through immigration agents to get into courses which have absolutely no value in India which makes it imperative that they work hard doing extra hours to recover the huge amounts they spent.

Besides, foreign students pay nearly four times the fees that locals pay, are denied the concessions that Australian students get on trains, trams, buses and for other public utilities. Indian students Down Under are promised fabulous job opportunities

by their agents back home, but they arrive in Australia and find it tough to get even a part-time job that would take care of fees and rent. Even the fate of some who get into elite institutions is no different. He has seen Indian girls pursuing masters from the University of Technology doing catering jobs in the suburbs, while girls from some of the South-East Asian countries choose to make money working in brothels and massage parlours.

For decades, the best and the brightest from India went to America in search of a better future. Today, the three million Americans of Indian origin not only have the highest education levels but also the highest

annual median earnings among all nationalities. You can't expect a country that until as recently as three decades ago practised the White Australia Policy, fearing that non-whites would swarm the place and take all their jobs, to be equally welcoming. Minister Krishna's advice to parents whose children were eager to go abroad was: be discriminating in the courses you choose. My advice to the young ones is: there are enough colleges here where you can get a good degree even as you join the radicals in shouting down the US of A. But if you have to go abroad, call Uncle Sam. He will look after you well.



R.PRASAD

This is not fair mate

Getting a measure of the J&K issue

LIKE MOST politicians, P. Chidambaram loves to talk, but it must be said to the home minister's credit that he is a rare politician whose actions speak louder than his words. He speaks tough, acts even tougher and it came as no surprise that after he replaced the narcissistic Shivraj Patil in North Block in the aftermath of 26/11, the country saw no terror attacks on its soil for nearly 13 months.

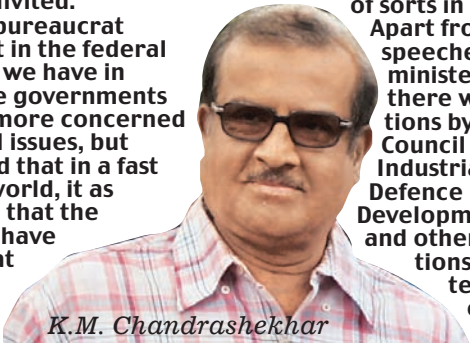
It was he, in cahoots with defence minister A.K. Antony who began the scaling down of the army's presence in Kashmir where almost 30,000 troops have been pulled out over the past few months and more are being gradually withdrawn to enable the state police to take over the task of manning law and order. The long tranquil spell was broken after the two-day-long fidayeen attack in Srinagar last week and the questions now being asked are: have the terrorists begun regrouping? If so, will the government continue with the withdrawal of the forces? True, the terrorists cocked a snook at the Centre's scaling down policy with their brazen attack, but if Chidambaram's response is any indication, troop withdrawals will go on as scheduled.

National security adviser M.K. Narayanan too appears confident that the process of troop reduction can and will continue. And Chidambaram's statement, issued last Friday, should end all speculation about any possible policy reversal. "The alert J&K Police... neutralised the militants without suffering any casualties and evacuated 600 citizens to safety."

It is noteworthy that the state police and the CRPF conducted the operation without calling upon the National Security Guards or the Army Special Forces". Chidambaram seems to subscribe to the view that, bereft of the popular support they once had, the terrorists will pop up once a while just to remind everyone that they are not finished yet.

IF THE UPA government has its way, bureaucrats across the country will be encouraged to get back to the classrooms and learn a whole lot of new skills. This is part of the prime minister's plans to bring babudom more in tune with the government's policies vis-a-vis the internal situation in the country as well as global trends. As a first step, cabinet secretary K.M. Chandrashekhara has invited chief secretaries of all states for a two-day conference to which all union ministers have also been invited.

A senior bureaucrat admits that in the federal set up that we have in place, state governments should be more concerned about local issues, but emphasised that in a fast changing world, it is imperative that the states also have a vision that encompasses



K.M. Chandrashekhara

Government wants to teach old dogs some new tricks

national as well as international issues. The conference scheduled for February 1 and 2 will be a first of sorts in many respects.

Apart from the mandatory speeches by the prime minister and the Cab Sec, there will be presentations by the chiefs of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, the Defence Research and Development Organisation and other scientific institutions on latest trends in technology that could be of use to

specific states; an address by foreign secretary Nirupama Rao on "Emerging Global Challenges and Opportunities", a presentation of International Trade Outlook by commerce secretary Nandan Nilekani will brief the officers on the Unique Identity Card mission and Union environment minister Jairam Ramesh will present a paper on climate change.

Given the security environment across the country where no state, big or small is left untouched by agents of terror, it is not surprising that the government believes that babus from the states should also be given lessons on key security concerns.

For the first time ever, the army, air force and naval chiefs will directly address state-level bureaucrats on the security environment and the role that the state governments must necessarily play to supplement the Centre's efforts. Hopefully, the back-to-the basics approach will yield dividends.

DELHIITES have in recent times seen the high-tech low-floor buses periodically go up in flames in many parts of the city and chief minister Sheila Dikshit has asked the manufacturers to rectify the faults or be ready to pay heavy damages. Something similar is happening in Tamil Nadu, the difference being that the private vehicles that are turning into fireballs are all owned by politicians, belonging to the AIADMK, the Congress, the CPI and the CPM. Last week, the AIADMK's Rajya Sabha MP V. Maitreyan lodged a police complaint after his car was found burnt long past midnight. After an inquiry that lasted exactly two days, the state police submitted a report that put the blame on a battery short circuit.

Former Union minister EVKS Elangovan and CPI state secretary Tha Pandian were two other leaders whose cars mysteriously caught fire when no one was watching. The police were swift in conducting inquiries and even swifter in reaching conclusions: battery short circuit. Opposition leaders are now planning to petition governor S.S. Barnala to hold an impartial inquiry into these incidents, but bound as the governor is by the state government's advice, his report may not differ much from that of the state police. Maitreyan at least has the satisfaction of the Rajya Sabha chairman — the country's Vice-President — seeking a detailed report on the torching of the car of a member of the Upper House.