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PM questions
Christian's role
installed Rafael
deal during UPA

CHENNAI, JAN 10 /--/ In a stinging counter-attack on the Rafale issue, Prime Minister Narendra Modi today accused the Congress of stalling defence procurement if there was "no deal"



for it. Modi also said the alleged middleman Christian Michel was close to the Congress first family and the people deserved to know the role played by him in the 10-year delay over the Rafale deal during UPA regime. Interacting with both level BJP workers of Tamil Nadu through video-conferencing, he said many people think that the biggest failure of Congress was mismanagement of the economy and corruption. "But they did deep damage to our defence sector for decades. They had made the defence sector a den of Bofors and brokers and middlemen. In their government, procurement would only happen if there was a deal. If there was no deal their approach was to simply stop buying anything for the armed forces," Modi said in response to a question.

Recalling defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman's statement during the debate in Lok Sabha over the Rafale issue, Modi said when India's neighbours were strengthening their forces with fourth and fifth generation fighters, the then Congress government stalled defence procurement. Recently, between 2004 and 2015, one of India's neighbours added 400 aircraft while another doubled the air force fleet strength with many of these being fourth and fifth generation fighters, he said. "What was the Congress government doing at that time? It stalled defence procurement for want of its deal while our neighbours increased capacity. Congress actually decreased ours. Such huge damage to the defence forces, all for the sake of a deal," Modi alleged.

Referring to negotiations to purchase 126 Rafale fighter jets during the UPA regime, Modi claimed Michel, being probed over the Augusta Westland chopper deal, had access to inside information like the timing of a cabinet meet on security and a government file on a related matter. (PTI)

Alok Verma shunted out as CBI director

Decision taken by panel led by PM, likely to be moved to NHRC

NEW DELHI, JAN 10 /--/ Within two days after being reinstated, Alok Verma was shunted out as the CBI chief after a marathon meeting of high-powered selection committee led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi today, officials said. Verma, a 1979-batch AGMUT cadre IPS officer, has been removed from the high-profile post on the charges of corruption and dereliction of duty making him the first chief in the history of the agency to face such action, they said. He is likely to be moved to the National Human Rights Commission, they said. There were eight counts of charges against him in the CVC report presented before the committee also comprising Leader of

Congress in Lok Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge and Justice A K Sikri, appointed by Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi as his nominee. The decision for the removal was taken by a majority with Kharge opposing the move, they said.

The high-powered committee headed by the Prime Minister met for over two hours on Thursday to decide fate of Verma, reinstated by a Supreme Court order after he was sent on forced leave by the government. The CBI chief and his deputy Special director Rakesh Asthana were sent on the forced leave over two months ago to stop the "kilkenny cat fight" between them. They had accused each

other of corruption. Verma, who resumed office on Wednesday, had revoked most of the transfers done by M Nageshwar Rao, who was appointed as the interim CBI chief in his absence. Ahead of the meeting, Kharge said he has sought documents, including enquiry report by the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) into the matter. "I have asked for certain documents from the government concerning the matter including the CVC's enquiry reports," he told reporters here earlier today. He said that Verma should also be given an opportunity to appear before the committee and represent his case. Congress President Rahul Gandhi also attacked the government

ahead of the crucial meeting and said Modi is in a "tearing hurry" to "sack" CBI chief Alok Verma because of the Rafale deal. "1. Why is the PM in such a tearing hurry to sack the CBI Chief? 2. Why will he not allow the CBI Chief to present his case in front of the selection committee? Answer: RAFALE," Rahul said on Twitter. The top court had asked the government to convene the meeting within a week of its order. It had quashed the government's unprecedented "overnight" order issued in October last year, stripping Verma of his powers and sending him on leave after he and his deputy traded corruption charges, sparking a bitter feud. (PTI)



Alok Verma leaving office on Thursday



Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee handing over a soft toy to a child at a public rally at Krishnanagar, Nadia —Photo: Shyamal Maitra

KCR against sharing stage with Rahul, to skip Mamata's Jan 19 Brigade rally

HYDERABAD, JAN 10 /--/ TRS chief K Chandrasekhar Rao will in all likelihood give a miss to the January 19 rally of Opposition parties proposed by the TMC in Kolkata as he does not want to share stage with the Congress, party sources said. KCR, as he is popularly known, had recently met Trinamool Congress (TMC) supremo and West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee as part of his renewed efforts towards forging a non-Congress, non-BJP federal front of regional parties. While the Telangana chief minister spoke to media after their meeting in Kolkata on December 24 last, Mamata reportedly not in favour of excluding the Congress in the proposed grand Opposition alliance, did not offer any comment. Asked if KCR would attend the Kolkata rally, TRS deputy floor leader in the Lok Sabha, B Vinod Kumar told news agency PTI today: "I do not know whether KCR got the invitation or not. I am not aware of it. He might have got the invitation. I do not think KCR will attend when Rahul Gandhi is attending."

For the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS), Congress is the main opposition in Telangana and KCR had last year described its president Rahul Gandhi as the "biggest baffle" in the country. The TRS returned to power last month, winning 88 seats in the 119-member Telangana Assembly, pushing

the Congress to a distant second position with 19 seats. The BJP won in only one segment. KCR had also recently met Odisha chief minister and Biju Janata Dal (BJP) chief Naveen Patnaik seeking to drum up support for the federal front. Patnaik's statement on Wednesday that his party would not align with the Congress and BJP has enthused the TRS. "I do not think because of KCR's visit, he (Patnaik) made such a statement. He took that position long back. He held the same view for a long time," Kumar said. He said both KCR and Patnaik have "same thoughts" as both are against aligning with the two national parties. The TRS leader said Samajwadi Party (SP) chief and former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Akhilesh Yadav, who could not meet KCR during the latter's visit to Delhi recently, was expected to visit the southern state "any time" to talk to the Telangana chief minister. On BSP supremo Mayawati's stance on KCR's federal front, he said: "We did not discuss with her". The TRS sources claimed that KCR's federal front idea was gaining traction. ".....already that idea is broached. Mayawati and Akhilesh took a stand that they are not going to ally with Congress in Uttar Pradesh. They are also fighting against the Congress and BJP, leaving only two seats for Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi," Kumar said. (PTI)

NCW issues notice to Rahul for 'misogynistic' remarks against Sitharaman, Cong cries foul

NEW DELHI, JAN 10 /--/ The National Commission for Women (NCW) today issued a notice to Congress president Rahul Gandhi for his "extremely misogynistic, offensive and unethical" remarks against defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman at a rally in Jaipur. In the notice, the women's panel said it has taken suo motu cognisance of news reports which appeared in various print and electronic media dated January 9, "wherein it is reported that you have allegedly made remarks insulting against a woman minister". "What is @rahulgandhi trying to imply with his misogynistic statement- "... ek mahila say kaha meri raksha kijiye?" Does he think women are weak? The irony- calling an accomplished defence minister of the largest democracy a weak person. @nsitharaman @narendramodi @ncwindia." NCW chief Rekha Sharma tweeted. The Congress chief at the farmers' rally on Wednesday had said: "The watchman with a 56-inch chest ran away and told a

woman, Sitharaman ji, defend me. I won't be able to defend myself, defend me." The NCW in the notice said: "It has been reported that you allegedly said "..... the PM ran away and asked a 'mahila' - a veiled reference to defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman - to defend him". "The remarks are extremely misogynistic, offensive, unethical and shows an extreme disrespect towards the dignity and honour of women in general," the commission said. It also said the NCW "strongly condemns such irresponsible and disparaging views of persons holding responsible positions". Delhi Commission For Women chief Swati Maliwal also condemned the Congress president's remarks. The Congress termed the NCW notice to its president as "politically motivated" as the party defended its leader and accused the Prime Minister of "lowering" the political discourse. Congress spokesperson Anand Sharma said the NCW was adopting "double standard" by sending a notice to Rahul, while remaining silent on Prime Minister Narendra

Modi's "objectionable references" to Sonia Gandhi during state Assembly polls. "There cannot be double standards, this is politically motivated," he said when asked about the NCW notice to Rahul. "Was the NCW in sleep mode when the prime minister used objectionable language and style against Sonia Gandhi during poll campaign in state assembly polls, while lowering the dignity of his position? He continues to speak in this mode," Sharma said. "It does not behave of the Prime Minister to use such words, the manner in which he speaks. Is this the prime minister's work, the manner in which he speaks while clapping his hands. It is the country's misfortune that it has a Prime Minister who works with malice. He has no decency and does not hold the dignity of the post he holds. "Why did the women's commission not give a notice to Narendra Modi then? It should seek a response from him on the words used by him," the senior Congress leader asserted. (PTI)

Judge recuses himself from Ayodhya case, SC to set up new bench before Jan 29

NEW DELHI, JAN 10 /--/ The Supreme Court today decided to constitute a fresh five-judge Constitution bench to hear the politically sensitive Ram Janambhumi-Babri Masjid land title dispute on January 29 after a judge, Justice U U Lalit, recused himself. Justice Lalit, who was part of a five-judge Constitution Bench headed by Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi, opted out of the hearing when the counsel for a Muslim party said he had appeared for former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Kalyan Singh as a lawyer in 1994. Senior advocate Rajeev Dhavan, who spoke up soon after the court assembled, said he was not seeking Justice Lalit's recusal. The bench, also comprising Justices S A Bobde, N V Ramana and D Y Chandrachud, noted the submissions made by Dhavan. Dhavan also drew the attention of the bench to the fact that the matter was earlier fixed for hearing before a three-judge bench but the CJJ took a decision to list it before a five-judge Constitution Bench. Dhavan further submitted

that there was need for a judicial order to set up a five-judge Constitution bench. The CJJ, however, quoted Supreme Court rules mandating that any bench should comprise two judges and there was nothing wrong in constituting a five-judge Constitution bench. In view of the facts and circumstances of the matter and the voluminous records pertaining to it, this was a fit case for constituting a five-

judge bench, he said. In its order, the bench said the apex court registry will physically examine the records stored in 50 sealed trunks in the room, which has also been kept sealed. The top court said the records pertaining to the matter are voluminous and some of the documents are in Sanskrit, Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, Persian and Gurmukhi that need to be translated. If required, the

apex court registry can take the service of official translators, the bench said. The apex court said in its order that 113 issues are likely to be perused during the hearing. It also noted that 88 witnesses were examined and their statements recorded when the matter was before the Allahabad High Court. It said the deposition of the witnesses runs into 2,886 pages and 257 documents were exhibited. (PTI)



Mahant Dharam Das with other sadhus and lawyers coming out of the Supreme Court after the hearing on Ram Janambhumi Temple-Babri Masjid case, in New Delhi on Thursday

IIT KGP to launch course on Artificial Intelligence



KOLKATA, JAN 10 /--/ The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur will launch a six-month Artificial Intelligence (AI) course at three centres in the country, a top official of the institute said Thursday.

IIT-KGP director Partha Pratim Chakrabarti told a press meet here that the certified programme is aimed at strengthening India's talent pool in Machine Learning and AI. Chakrabarti said the courses, which will begin from March this year will be offered at IIT KGP's Kolkata facility, at IIT KGP's Kharagpur campus and at a rented premise at Bengaluru. He said thousands of new jobs were being cre-

ated in AI sector every year with AI growing at 10-15 per cent on annual rate and there was need to have more skilled people in the AI sector. "AI is the future which will more invade our lives in the coming days," the IIT-KGP director said.

Head, Centre for Artificial Intelligence, IIT KGP, Prof Sudeshna Sarkar said, the course with 300 students will consist of 16 modules - each having 12-hour duration. Around 2 lakh jobs in AI are expected to be created by 2020 in India, Sarkar said. She said the classes will be taken by IIT KGP faculty, reputed academic institutions and industry experts. There

will be 60 per cent from the IIT KGP faculty and academics and 40 per cent from industry who will be teaching the students in the 16 modules, Sarkar explained. She said the demand is getting higher in AI in the country than the total number of AI-skilled professionals and there was need to bridge that gap. The course modules have been carefully designed to cover mathematical and algorithmic foundations, AI fundamentals and statistical and machine learning methods.

"The courses will have a blend on fundamental theoretical principles as well as hands-on component and industry use cases and stu-

dents will have the opportunity to work on live projects. Every course module will be based on assignments and exams and a certificate will be awarded based on successful completion of the modules. It will be rigorous," she said. The students will be selected competitively from working professionals and senior students. Tools and platforms will be introduced to make the students, from working professionals and senior students, technologically competent and ready for jobs.

The AI course, application for which commenced on January 2 for screening and shortlisting, will start from March 10, this year. (PTI)

AT A GLANCE

Sheila Dikshit new Delhi Cong chief

NEW DELHI: Former chief minister Sheila Dikshit was appointed the Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee president today, days after Ajay Maken resigned from the post citing ill-health. Making the announcement, All India Congress Committee (AICC) in-charge of the party's Delhi unit, P C Chacko, said Dikshit would be assisted by three working presidents -- Devender Yadav, Haroon Yusuf and Rajesh Lilotia.