

THE FORTNIGHT THAT WAS

Offensive Postures

THERE was a combative edge to the fortnight that was, a pugnacity of purpose that has not been in evidence for some time now. With unobtrusive suddenness, we are witness to an onslaught of offensives, some inspired by circumstance, others by deliberate design. But taken together, they represent a new and aggressive phase in the march of moments, a sudden burst of adrenalin at the sight of the tape.

Paradoxically, the biggest offensive turned out to be something of a damp firecracker. India's rapid deployment of the army to foil a coup attempt in the Maldives was an ideally-conceived military and diplomatic operation. But the fact that the invaders fled before the Indian force arrived, and were finally tackled by the navy on the high seas, deprived the event of the requisite drama. Even more of a dilution was the realisation that the mercenaries were Tamil militants from Jaffna, members of the same group who had been earlier trained—and armed—by Indian intelligence agencies.

But despite the ironies—and the fact that not many Indians can locate Maldives on the map—the event did much to salvage Indian diplomatic pride in the light of its less successful military operations in Sri Lanka. By responding so quickly and with such ruthless efficiency, New Delhi re-emphasised its clout and its ambition to play the regional gendarme.

It was, however, the offensives launched on the domestic battlefield that were perhaps of more immediate relevance.

Obviously with an eye on the coming elections, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has started to display a new aggressiveness. In the past fortnight, he has spearheaded a frontal assault on the Opposition and,

somewhat surprisingly, on the independent media as well.

In part, the pep and pugnacity is a reflection of a new-found confidence. But essentially, it is a strategy aimed at appealing directly to the rural masses who will be his best bet in the coming electoral battle. That strategy was also amply mirrored in the populist resolutions adopted at the AICC(1) session held in New Delhi, an elaborate menu of welfare and poverty-related schemes that even Mrs Gandhi, the master of populism, had not dared to promise in her most desperate moments.

If Rajiv was in a battling mood, his political nemesis, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, was not lagging far behind either. In an uncharacteristic burst of aggression, Singh went for the party's jugular—the prime minister himself. For the first time since his abdication from the party-fold, Singh directly accused Rajiv Gandhi of being a recipient in the Bofors pay-offs. Though his action may have been a trifle hasty, it did inspire Rajiv to state that his government had never claimed that no commissions had been paid. That only puzzled the public even more.

Another government lie was nailed in Punjab—and in the most tragic fashion. Barely had Governor S.S. Ray and police chief K.P.S. Gill stated that the law and order situation was under control when terrorists launched their bloodiest offensive in recent memory. In just over a fortnight, 175 people had died, including the first serving general in the Indian Army to be killed by terrorists, Major General B.N. Kumar.

The good news was on the economic front. With prospects of a bumper harvest increasing, all signals indicate that the economy is poised for a boom, at least in the coming months. That, of course, only reinforces the old adage that for every cloud there is a silver lining.



Illustrations by
MANJULA PADMANABHAN

In an uncharacteristic burst of aggression, V.P. Singh went for the party's jugular—the prime minister himself.



Rajiv displays a new aggressiveness, spearheading a frontal assault on the Opposition and, the independent media.

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