

**Defiant India takes on world with nuclear tests.**By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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NEW DELHI, May 12 (Reuters) - India prepared on Tuesday to face the world's shock and dismay over its three underground nuclear tests, and its faltering government appeared to have won sweeping domestic backing for its bold and defiant step.

The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party catapulted India into confrontation with world governments only seven weeks after taking power at the helm of a shaky and raucous coalition.

Domestic squabbles and a foundering economy were forgotten as opposition politicians and the BJP's allies joined in a chorus of praise for what they saw as a telling nuclear deterrent.

Business leaders said they were confident foreign investment inflows would not be affected, but share prices on the Bombay and Delhi stock exchanges slipped in late-night kerb trading.

"We have to prove that we are not eunuchs," said Bal Thackeray, leader of a militant Hindu party that rules India's richest state Maharashtra in partnership with the BJP.

"We should not sit quiet when we know that the enemy is around us. We are a more powerful nation now," Thackeray said.

In unmistakable terms, New Delhi broke a self-imposed 24-year moratorium on nuclear testing and proclaimed it had "proven capability" for a nuclear weapons programme.

India's arch-foe Pakistan was quick to denounce the tests and said it reserved the right to take "all appropriate measures for its security" and to make its defence "impregnable".

The three blasts were carried out in the Thar desert in the state of Rajasthan, close to India's border with Pakistan.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee told a hurriedly summoned news conference the three controlled tests were carried out with a fission device, a low-yield device and a much-bigger thermonuclear device - in other words, a hydrogen bomb.

British seismologists said the blasts produced a light earthquake measuring 4.7 on the Richter scale.

Raja Ramanna, one of the scientists who masterminded India's May 1974 underground test at the same site in Rajasthan, said Monday's blasts signalled "tremendous progress".

"Producing a hydrogen bomb is no simple thing and it seems to have worked," Ramanna told Reuters. "The tests were done one after the other...and the secrecy was maintained."

Secrecy and surprise appeared to be hallmarks of the tests.

Despite regular monitoring of South Asian test sites, the U.S. intelligence community, like U.S. policymakers, were caught off guard by New Delhi's tests.

"In the weeks preceding what happened today, the activity there (at India's test site) appeared to be of a routine nature," one U.S. official told Reuters.

"The Indians clearly went out of their way to conceal what they were doing," he said.

China, India's nuclear-armed neighbour to the north, was silent. Analysts said fear of Beijing was at the heart of New Delhi's pre-emptive move. The two countries fought a brief and bloody war in 1962 and India's new defence minister George Fernandes has termed China "potential threat number one".

But the United States, branding the tests as "flying in the face" of international efforts for a global ban on





nuclear testing, said it would lodge a formal protest with India and urged Pakistan not to respond with tests of its own.

U.S. officials said the test may force the United States to impose sanctions, which could hit aid programmes and credits to the poverty-stricken country.

Canada said the tests would be "front and centre" of the May 15-17 Group of Eight summit of the world's most powerful nations in Birmingham, England. Germany said the tests were a "slap in the face" of nations that had signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The Times of India said in an early morning editorial posted on the Internet that the tests cast an "ominous shadow over India's frayed relations with its neighbours".

"More than a demonstration of India's enhanced nuclear capability, the tests represent a political statement by New Delhi under the saffron (Hindu) flag," the newspaper said. "Unfortunately, it is not clear to what extent the Vajpayee government has thought through the strategic implications of its decision."

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