

India aide says Pakistan missile triggered n-tests.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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NEW DELHI, May 13 (Reuters) - Pakistan's test launch of its longest-range missile last month triggered this week's series of underground nuclear tests by India, a senior Indian official said on Wednesday.

In a briefing for Western news agencies hours after India stunned the world with two more underground nuclear blasts, the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, set forth the rationale for the tests in unambiguous terms.

"No more tests are planned," he said. Asked why the tests had been conducted at this time, he said: "The tests had been on the anvil for some time. Tests were planned in December 1995 and February 1996; (a) previous government cancelled them."

The official noted that before the Bharatiya Janata Party took power at the head of a coalition in mid-March it had said it wanted to keep the nuclear option open.

He said the turning point came with the April 6 test launch by Pakistan of its "Ghauri" medium-range missile.

"When we came into power we found our security situation even more dangerous than what we had expected. Then comes the Ghauri missile with all kinds of claims from the other side about what places in India it can hit. So we decided - let us go ahead."

Asked if India would press ahead with development of its own intermediate-range ballistic missile, the "Agni", the official said: "Tests and missiles go together."

He said there had been an "asymmetry" in the strategic balance in India's neighbourhood, and "the equation includes China".

"There was an asymmetry in the region, and we have corrected that," he said. "We believe Pakistan already has nuclear weapons. We take it for granted that they will also have a test. We are ready for it. We now have a credible nuclear deterrent."

Referring to U.S. President Bill Clinton's urging that India sign the nuclear test treaty "now and without conditions", the official said: "That is not on; any unconditional signature on the CTBT (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty) is not on."

"We are willing to adhere to some conditions of the CTBT on the basis that it is a reciprocal arrangement. So we are prepared to talk...India has arrived at a certain stage and can no longer be treated in the same category as non-nuclear weapons states."

Negotiations would depend on the type of controls clamped on India, the official said, "for instance on the supply of 'dual-purpose' materials and technology".

He noted that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which again India has refused to sign, cannot be amended to include India as a nuclear weapons state. "But the reality is India cannot be treated as a non-nuclear weapons state."

He said Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government had weighed the effects of sanctions that might be imposed by other countries as a result of the nuclear tests. "Of course this will affect India. How badly, we will see. I am sure (sanctions) will hurt the economy, but we are not going to be a pariah state."

Asked about the firestorm of international anger the nuclear tests had aroused, the official said: "I say it with regret - most of those who have criticised us, deplored and condemned our action are covered by the nuclear umbrella. They are criticising us for taking steps to ensure our security."

The official said India had told China several times that unresolved border disputes between the giant neighbours and "assistance being given to Pakistan on the nuclear and missile fronts is an impediment to full



trust being established".

But he said there was no provocation from China for this week's series of tests.

"We will not have parity with China, who have conducted dozens of tests. But the asymmetry is not as bad as it was."

Asked about the surprise and secrecy surrounding the tests, the official said "very, very few people" knew about the preparations. He said radioactivity had been contained so well after Monday's first set of three tests that "we went back to the same spot today for the second series".

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Analysts said Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who has been described by a senior colleague earlier this year as appearing to be weak and indecisive, had struck a blow for his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

The "why now" question gnawed at a world caught by surprise by the tests, but the BJP's election manifesto said "A nation as large and complex as ourselves must make its impact felt on the world arena."

A senior government official told Reuters the nuclear option was the one clause in the BJP's election manifesto that did not call for consultation with any of Vajpayee's fractious allies on grounds of national security.

"The gun was aimed and ready," the official said. "The BJP only had to pull the trigger - and the sooner the better."

Vajpayee's predecessor leader Kumar Jagal said as much, saying in an interview with Reuters Television that he had been aware of, and approved, preparations for nuclear tests after scientists perfected computer simulations.

Indeed, the BJP's national security goals have survived, and been burnished, even in the "National Agenda" hammered out with 45 coalition partners, while its more sweeping narrative of Hindu nationalist goals have been quietly jettisoned.

Analysts said Monday's tests, which ended 24 years of speculation that its nuclear programme was a peaceful one after the 1974 blast, opened a window on India as up at the same table as the world's five biggest nuclear powers.

"Let the world know of India's capability and that we will be in a position right now to declare a nuclear weapons state any time," Science and Technology Minister Murli Manohar Joshi said.

By stopping just short of using words a nuclear weapons nation, the senior government official said, India retained a powerful bargaining tool in global disarmament negotiations.

Following in the footsteps of France and China, the official said, the BJP sought to join the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty - but not "in a vacuum". A government statement said on Monday, New Delhi would demand that Pakistan, too, follow suit.

Despite Pakistan's vigorous score-settling with India's Monday nuclear launch, New Delhi appeared to be moving away from a half-century-old fixation on its neighbour as arch-enemy.

Jagal said that "India's security concern is not and should not be Pakistan-centric" and argued that nuclear deterrence would, in effect, eliminate the threat for war on the troubled yet volatile border.

Krishna Chandra Pant, who heads a task force that will prepare the ground for a Nuclear Security Council, echoed Jagal but took his view a step further, saying the tests were not even meant to counter a perceived threat from China.

"I don't think it is a question of parity. I think one of the fundamental is to develop a deterrence," Pant said, adding: "An option which is kept open forever is no deterrent."

Pant was referring to successive Indian government policies since the only other nuclear test in 1974 by Pakistan.