With Govt on the line, PM calls Karunanidhi

W DELHI, April 10: In the rarest signal so far that BJP is all set to break away from the AIADMK, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee spoke to the general council will have to take a decision. The Chief Minister said it would not be fair on his part to divulge what transpired during the Prime Minister’s discussions with him. “I have not told you about the Prime Minister’s call. But since you had come to know on your own through New Delhi reports, I do not want to deny it. Yes, the Prime Minister did speak but I can’t say more than that at this stage.” Asked if the Prime Minister sought his party’s support, Karunanidhi laughed: “It is for you to speculate.” Observers consider the call as significant in view of the DMK’s strength of six Lok Sabha members. Though the AIADMK has 18 Lok Sabha members, the BJP is apparently confident of surviving a no-confidence motion if the DMK’s support is assured. The PM’s call comes after an embarrassing mix-up earlier when Home Minister L.K. Advani also rang up Karunanidhi to elicit his support while Human Resource Development Minister Murli Manohar Joshi telephoned AIADMK supremo Jayalalitha to plead with her not to withdraw from the alliance. It was a classic case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing. And late in the evening, the party began damage control with chief Kushabhau Thakre strenuously disowning Joshi’s phone call to Jayalalitha. He told reporters that the HRD Minister’s contact with the AIADMK leader was his own initiative and was not authorised either by the Government or the party. BJP sources said Vajpayee funneled at Joshi when he got to know of the Minister’s initiative. Joshi was told that his call had blunted the Government’s cold war with the AIADMK, coming as it did at a time when Vajpayee had decided to act tough with Jaya and not bow to her dictates any more.

Come, test our strength in House, dares Nitish

PATNA, April 10: Union railways Minister Nitish Kumar threw an open challenge to the Congress and all the parties clamouring for the fall of the Atal Behari Vajpayee government, to come to Parliament and test its majority. Quite confident of his government staying in power, the Railways said that any amount of pressure tactics would not work and the A B Vajpayee government’s future was bright. Predicting the survival of his government, Nitish made a jibe at his detractors, saying, “Those dreaming of splitting the Samata Party are nurturing wrong notions. All the 13 Samata Members of Parliament are solidly behind the Prime Minister and the party stands like a rock.”

Either we rule or all go to polls - Cong

NEW DELHI, April 10: The Congress has made it clear to Opposition party managers that in case the BJP-led Government falls, Sonia Gandhi will head an alternative only if it’s a purely Congress Government supported from the outside by other
MANGROVES AND THEIR ROLE IN ISLAND ECOSYSTEMS

A.K.V. Nasser and Gulshad Mohammed
CMFRI, Minicoy.

Until recently, mangrove swamps were seen as mosquito-infested wastelands, utilized as convenient sites for open dumps and sewage discharges. Mangrove forests are, however, among the most productive ecosystems of the world. Their productivity is about 70 times the maximum value reported for tropical oceanic waters. Because of this high rate of organic production, they are able to sustain important and valuable populations of fish, shellfish and wildlife and are prime breeding and nursery grounds for many species. Mangroves act as a self-maintaining buffer zone against storms, strong winds and currents and reduce coastal and riverine erosion. The main reason the mangroves have been undervalued and poorly managed is the lack of available information about the resource, its role and vulnerability.

The word 'mangrove' is employed to describe a group of plants adapted to colonize water-logged, oxygen-poor, saline soils. They grow as trees or shrubs along most tropical estuaries and sheltered shores. The distribution of mangroves are limited globally by temperature and their lack of tolerance to cold conditions. Other limiting factors include suitable physiography, presence of salt water, tidal amplitude, precipitation, river discharge, shelter and availability of nutrient-rich sediments.

Mangroves are believed to have originated in the Indo-Pacific region with 60 species reported from this area. India has a mangrove cover of 3150 sq. km and 80% of it occurs along the east coast and in the Andaman Islands. The mangrove swamps of Sunderbans in West Bengal has the maximum mangrove cover in India. Other areas include the mangroves of Mahanadi delta, Kutch and Saurashtra, Pichavaram and Muthupet in Tamil Nadu. In Lakshadweep, mangroves are noticed in Minicoy island comprising three species.

The mangroves of Minicoy have been described in an earlier communication by Nasser and Kunhikoya (Lakshadweep Times, Minicoy, 6 June 1996). Unlike the mangroves of the Indian mainland, these plants are in the formative stage and free from serious human pressure. They are present as two patches each of about 1 ha in area. The mangroves on the south-eastern side of the island comprise of a single species, Bruguiera cylindrica, while the mangroves of the south-western side near helipad consist of Ceriops tagal and a solitary tree of Avicennia marina.

Coral reefs, seagrasses and mangroves interact physically in a number of ways. Seagrasses and mangroves are highly dependent on barriers such as coral reefs which reduce wave energy. In turn, mangrove forests act as depositional basins and are effective binders of sediments. As a result the sediment load in coastal waters is reduced, shoreline erosion is prevented and flushing of beaches is checked. Mangrove forests also regulate fresh water inflows into coastal areas. Fresh water entered in mangroves are lost by evaporation or dissolved with the salts present in mangroves before entering coastal waters. Thus the volume of undiluted fresh water reaching the coast is reduced. Since the fresh water is discharged from mangroves over a longer time period, salinity changes are also buffered. Many marine plants and animals including corals are sensitive to salinity variations.

The inorganic nutrients, phosphorus and nitrogen are essential to the primary production of all ecosystems. In most marine systems, nitrogen is considered to be the most limiting nutrient, and this is probably true of coral reefs, seagrasses and mangroves. Mangrove and seagrass systems tend to "leak" or export nutrients. Some of the excess nutrients enter the coastal waters as dissolved and particulate organic matter and nourish reef organisms. Water flowing out of mangroves have high levels of dissolved organic matter. These materials are transported by water currents and acted upon by micro-organisms, zooplankton, ciliates and other organisms. They break the leaf and wood of mangroves into small fragments. A small particle with its associated microbial community constitute a protein rich food source for large marine animals.
Coral reefs are known for the diversity and abundance of their fish and invertebrate fauna. Mangrove areas are recognised as important nursery areas for many important commercial organisms as well as some of the reef species. The nursery function of mangroves is mainly due to the availability of shelter for juvenile organisms and an abundant supply of food. Many of the reef animals have their early life stages in the mangrove regions and later move away and migrate off shore. Examples of such behaviour include the spiny lobsters, shrimps and a variety of fishes. The larvae of lobsters have a free swimming existence and finally settle among the roots of mangroves. As the juveniles grow, the mangrove roots no longer provide sufficient shelter and they move off to deeper waters and reefs. The presence of juveniles attract large predatory fishes to the mangroves making them excellent fishing grounds for carnivorous fishes.

Human impacts disturb mangrove systems in varying degrees ranging from trivial effects to complete destruction. Direct, deliberate, physical disturbance to mangroves include cutting of trees and stripping bark for tanning. A common destructive practice is clear-cutting and filling to create dry land. Other factors that destroy mangroves include oil spills and thermal effluents. Garbage dumping and concentration of pesticides results in death of mangroves. Excessive fisheries in mangrove areas lead to depletion of stocks. Destruction of mangroves will result in sediment flows onto coral reefs causing permanent damage. There will be excessive outflow of particulate and dissolved organic matter which may cause smothering, shading and eutrophication. Finally, refuges and nursery grounds for various fishes and invertebrates will be destroyed and secondary productivity of seagrass beds and reefs will be reduced.

In small islands like those of Lakshadweep, inland and coastal ecosystems are intimately linked. Inland activities like deforestation, agriculture, raising of domestic animals, road building and many other activities can increase sediment levels in coastal ecosystems are intimately linked. Inland activities like deforestation, agriculture, raising of domestic animals, road building and many other activities can increase sediment levels in coastal waters, contributing to the degradation of coastal ecosystem. Protection of the marine resource depends on developing land use practices that will not impair the productivity of mangroves, seagrass beds and coral reefs.

Society derives direct and indirect benefits from the conservation of mangroves. They are part of the resource base upon which islands depend. There are very practical reasons for their conservation, including the products they yield (wood, fisheries) and their role in protecting the coasts from erosion. Tourism, an important source of income, can be developed to take advantage of their uniqueness and great beauty. Natural reserves and parks can be established to protect important areas, these attract local as well as international tourists and also stimulate scientific research, all of which benefit the local economy. Mangroves are valuable educational assets.

Mangroves are among the most productive coastal ecosystems known to science. In addition to their aesthetic and recreational values, they form an important economic resource base of islands due to their intimate ties to fisheries, seagrass beds and coral reefs. The plea to conserve mangroves generally evoke negative reactions. This is because of a lack of understanding of their importance. There is an urgent need to provide education and increase awareness of various levels of society, on the ecological and economical importance of mangroves. An understanding of their role in coastal protection and the nature of fish and wildlife should lead to more enlightened mangrove management practices.

Island coastal marine ecosystems worldwide are facing problems due to high populations, mounting pressure to develop, a limited land base, and inadequate impact assessment procedures.