

Gujarat minister admits to 'some irregularities'

Bid to contain damage by CAG report through House panel

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GANDHINAGAR: An air of uncertainty prevailed in the state secretariat on Monday over the damage control measures to be undertaken on the bombshell dropped by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) in its report indicting chief minister Keshubhai Patel and the cabinet's No 2 Suresh Mehta for their foreign visits in 1999-2000.

Mr Mehta is planning to knock on the doors of the assembly's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) to reverse the comments made on his visit and also on the purchase of the Rs 18-crore aircraft without inviting international tenders.

This is for the first time that a minister would be approaching the 12-member PAC, chaired by an Opposition leader, to ask specific questions to the CAG in relation to the report. State finance minister Vajubhai Vala, on the other hand, said he agreed there were 'some irregularities' but there was 'nothing illegal in the foreign trips'. He also mooted the idea of approaching the PAC for 'clarification on the government viewpoint'.

It is learnt that PAC chairman M. Rathwa has convened a meeting on September 12. Mr Rathwa, a Congress MLA, is said to be surprised at the government's move and is consulting experts on what stand to take.

Mr Vala and several other senior ministers on Monday were also seen trying to find out from legal experts and bureaucrats on what could be done to contain the damage. The government is already incurring huge expenditure on issuing advertisements to local

newspapers giving a point-by-point reply to the CAG report but it feels that more should be done to contain the loss of image that Mr Patel himself and the government at large has suffered because of the report.

The CAG report was placed in the Assembly only last week though it was submitted in March 2001. The CAG had told the state government not to wait for so long to place the report and, if necessary, call a special assembly session to table it in the House. When approached, Mr Vala said, "We cannot go according to what the CAG says."

Finding the CAG report 'too harsh' on foreign visits, bureaucrats have started saying they would rather not go abroad at all. Several CAG officials were here in the state's general administrator department recently checking huge volumes of files on more recent foreign visits which have not been included in its latest report.

Mr Patel had sent three top bureaucrats—G. Subba Rao, P.K. Laheri and A.W.P. David—to convince the CAG about how the visit was 'perfectly in order' when the draft report sent to Mr Patel for perusal was found to be 'too strong'.

They also replied to the issue of purchase of the Rs 18-crore plane without global tenders, okayed by Mr Patel personally. However, "the replies were just brushed aside," an official said.

Officials say Mr Patel and the team of top officials accompanying him to the foreign trips fell victim to a circular issued under his instructions on April 17, 1999.

The circular requires officers and ministers, including the chief minister, to give a number of details as it found that till then no one gave relevant details needed for examining expenses and clearances of foreign trips.

Issued after discussions by the then finance secretary K.V. Bhanujan and GAD former secretary A.W.P. David, the circular makes it mandatory for each officer to tell the GAD as to "why the proposed visit is inevitable or why the purpose for which the visit is proposed to be undertaken cannot be served through telephone calls, fax messages and correspondences."

Approvals from the GAD, finance department, chief secretary, the prime minister's office, ministry of external affairs, ministry of finance, ministry of home affairs are a must, the circular says.

It says all clearances must be obtained "before the foreign trip is undertaken," and those going on trips would be required to put up a "complete detailed report on the foreign visit" after their return.

The details include "purpose of the tour, whom did he/she meet during the trip abroad, what was the nature of discussion, a copy of the proceedings, conclusions at the end of discussions, how the purpose of the visit was met, an action plan for follow-up with the time limits specified."

The report must be put up in 15 days, the circular states. It lowers the earlier limit of \$500 per day to \$300 for developed countries, and \$100 if expenditure is borne by the embassies.