

# CAG report on coffins deal based on hearsay: Jaitley

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MUMBAI: Charging that the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) had "acted on hearsay and not on facts" with regards to the controversial coffins deal, Union law minister Arun



Arun Jaitley

Jaitley declared here on Monday that the government would soon place the "truth" before Parliament.

Mr Jaitley, who was addressing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) workers here on Monday on the need to adopt the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (Poto), said the government was in the process of gathering more material to refute CAG's observations.

Later, Mr Jaitley told newsmen that he was charging CAG of not acting on facts although he knew "fully well that CAG is a constitutional authority". Asked to spell out the Vajpayee government's attitude on the issue, Mr Jaitley said it was really strange that "while the government wanted to discuss the CAG report, the opposition was not prepared to do so".

As per parliamentary procedure, the CAG report should go to the public accounts committee (PAC) of the house for consideration. After the PAC considered the report, it would be placed before

the house for a discussion. However, in this case, the government was prepared to take up the report for a discussion directly, but the opposition was not interested. "They only want to stall the working of the house," he remarked.

Mr Jaitley — who was in Mumbai as per BJP's plan to depute senior Union ministers to different parts of the country to educate party workers as well as members of the intelligentsia on the need for Poto — ridiculed the opposition in general and the Congress in particular for their opposition to Poto.

"I can understand the stand taken by smaller parties. But the Congress, which ruled the country for 45 years and which was now the main opposition party, should act with more responsibility," he said.

everybody's eyes. "I want to know whether those against Poto want those involved in the December 13 attack conspiracy to secure bail under the existing legal provisions? Should the statements of the accused be admitted as evidence or not? What about the admissibility of the electronic intercept as a piece of evidence? Should the funds seized from them be confiscated or not? Finally, should those funding them be made liable for action or not?"

Raising these questions, Mr Jaitley said the government was determined to introduce the Poto bill. "We were firm on this stand even before December 13."

About the coffins deal, the

Union minister said the affair dated back to 1994 when an Indian contingent joined the UN peace-keeping force in Somalia. After returning to India, a commander of the contingent had said that aluminium caskets were available for US \$ 172. At the instance of the ministry of defence and the army, the then United Front government in 1997 asked the military attache in Washington to get details about the caskets and the firm referred to by the commander. The attache wrote back stating that there was no such firm.

Mr Jaitley said that when quotations were subsequently called for, the price quoted by a U.S. firm was \$ 2,500 per casket. Based on this, orders were placed after the Kargil war. Hence, the CAG's observation that caskets were available for U.S. \$ 172 was baseless. He said aluminium coffins had to be used since the bodies of military personnel were sent from the battlefield to distant villages for cremation. "As wooden coffins may get damaged in transit, it was decided to import aluminium coffins since they were not readily available in India," he explained.

Mr Jaitley disclosed that defence minister George Fernandes had, on his own accord, sent the file regarding the coffin purchase to the CAG to ensure transparency. Mr Jaitley referred to a news item in this newspaper after the ruckus in Parliament over the deal, stating that such caskets were priced around US \$ 2,500.