Natwar Singh Steps Aside

LOSES POSITION FOLLOWING ALLEGATIONS OF PROFITING IN IRAQ OIL-FOR-FOOD PROGRAM

NEW DELHI (AP, PTI) – India’s foreign minister has become the first political casualty of the U.N. oil-for-food scandal. Natwar Singh has been stripped of his post over allegations in an independent report that he profited from massive corruption in the effort to help Iraq’s suffering under sanctions.

The accusation that Singh was among the thousands of prominent companies and politicians worldwide to illegally benefit from the program has roiled India for days and led to widespread calls for his resignation.

As the issue snowballed into a political crisis, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh ordered two separate investigations into the allegations and on Nov. 7 summoned Natwar Singh for an

Spate of Burglaries Hits Silicon Valley Communities

Cupertino resident Sri Ram, whose home was burglarized twice in the last six years.

Amritraj Scores Another First

Producer Abhik Amritraj scored another first Oct. 21 when two of his films — Dreamer and Shopgirl — opened in theaters, the former scoring big at the box office and the latter garnering the best reviews of his 20-plus year career.

A rash of home burglaries has been hitting the Indian American community in the Silicon Valley in recent months.

Two Indian American homes were burglarized in Sunnyvale, Calif., over the last 10 days, while in the same city, in a span of two months this year, burglaries occurred in a total of 10 Indian American homes.

In Cupertino, an upscale neighborhood, every two weeks, at least one Indian American home has been burglarized in recent months, according to Raj Abhyankar, who is running for city council in that community and has made the unsolved burglaries a campaign issue.

Indian Americans living in other South Bay cities in the Silicon Valley — Mountain View, Santa Clara, San Jose and Milpitas — have also become victims of burglaries in recent years, with the incidents occurring with numbing frequency.

Whoever is doing it seems to be after one thing only: gold jewelry.

Dalit Environmentalist Honored

Felix Sugirtharaj has fought to save mangroves

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Activist Honored for Protecting Mangroves in India

Felix Sugirtharaj, who received the Seacology Lifetime Achievement Award from Seacology executive director Paul Cox, soon with Patrick Danaya Pate of Papua New Guinea, another prize recipient, at a ceremony in the San Francisco Bay Area (Farrakh Aafad photo).

The significance of mangroves in the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Islands and Pulicut Lake, which is one of several salty water lakes surrounding more than 30 islands on India’s eastern coastal belt. There are several ranges of mangroves for the fishing community is just a tip of the iceberg, explained Sugirtharaj. “Mangroves in India are a treasure and said to be water bowls for fishermen, because it is in the mangrove forest you see fish aggregation.”

These woody trees not only provide a source of income for fishermen, but also are used for medicinal purposes, firewood and building homes.

The importance of the forests was largely ignored when much of the mangrove forests were destroyed by the shrimp farming industry. Even the Indian government eradicated some forest areas at Pulicut Lake to build a missile station.

By organizing campaigns at a grassroots level, the environmentalists took the plight of the fishing community to India’s Supreme Court, urging it to take action against those who were destroying the habitat.

As a result of his efforts, actions were taken including banning of new shrimp farms and blocking expansion of existing farms. The Indian government and the Forest Department also took steps to work with the fishing community on conservation issues. All mangroves of the Andaman Islands, which cover 12 percent of the land, have been declared conservation areas.

While positive steps have been taken at a federal level to protect mangroves, Sugirtharaj said much more still needs to be done as other trees are still perceived to be more valuable than mangroves. “The Department of Environmental Forest in Andaman does not consider mangroves as important because it is more interred in other forests for the best tea and teak wood. They’d rather protect those trees than mangroves,” he said.

One of Sugirtharaj’s recent projects has been the establishment of a mangrove resource center on the Andaman Islands. It was created, in part, to educate the younger generation by introducing mangrove education in schools. Even though the Supreme Court has ordered that environmental education must be taught in schools, he stated that it is not being taken seriously. As a result, the center has been working on a syllabus that will be used in schools and colleges.

The center has also been instrumental in providing a source of income for many fishermen who lost their homes and boats in last year’s tsunami, and a biological garden was created to train the local people to plant mangroves.

“We have asked the Forest Department to buy mangrove trees from us so they can plant them in areas where mangroves have been destroyed,” Sugirtharaj said.

The activist, who received a $7,500 by-award, backed his earlier statement of commitment to serving the people of the Andaman Islands for the rest of his life by making an announcement that would impact the lives of women there.

“In Andaman Islands, there are 100,000 widows who lost their husbands in last year’s tsunami. I have decided to offer a part of my prize money to the women who have been taken seriously,” Sugirtharaj said.

In the past, transcendental meditation and yoga have also been protested and subsequently removed from public schools in other parts of the U.S. But here, Sugirtharaj noted, the government eradicated some forest areas at Pulicut Lake to build a missile station.

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