

COURT JAILS ONE, FREES TWO OVER 2005 DELHI BOMB BLASTS

NEW DELHI: An Indian court sentenced one person to 10 years' imprisonment but acquitted two others yesterday over bomb blasts that ripped through New Delhi in 2005, killing 62 people and wounding many more. New Delhi's Patiala House Court sentenced Tariq Ahmed Dar to a decade in jail for his involvement in the explosions that tore through two crowded markets and a bus ahead of the Hindu festival of lights, Diwali, in October 2005.

But the court said that since Dar had already served 12 years behind bars while awaiting the outcome of his case, he could walk free. It also let off two of his alleged accomplices, Mohammed

Hussain Fazili and Mohammed Rafiq Shah, citing lack of evidence from the prosecution.

"The court acquitted two of the three accused in the case and the third one was convicted for unlawful activities," Sushil Bajaj, the lawyer for Fazili, told reporters after the hearing.

"Unless there are any other pending cases against them, the court said they should be released from jail forthwith." All three were reportedly charged with waging war against the state, conspiring, collecting arms, murder and attempt to murder in 2008.

Apart from the 62 dead, 210 people were

wounded in the blasts that hit minutes apart, setting off blazes and turning shops at Delhi's Sarojini Nagar and Paharganj markets into heaps of twisted metal and broken glass. It remains unclear who carried out the bomb blasts, with a little-known group Inquilab (Revolution) claiming responsibility at the time. But New Delhi suspected Islamic guerrillas from Kashmir behind the blasts a claim rejected by Islamabad and pro-Pakistan militant groups including Lashkar-e-Taiba which has been involved in a number of deadly attacks in India.

Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan but claimed in its entirety by both. — AFP

BIG FAT INDIAN WEDDINGS IN CROSSHAIRS OF THRIFTY MP

NEW DELHI: Extravagant Indian weddings in palaces featuring elephants, foreign dance troupes and seven-course meals could become a thing of the past if one politician fed up with the excess gets her way. Rankled by the obscene sums splashed out on festivities, Ranjeet Ranjan from the opposition Congress Party has proposed a bill that would cap the entertainment budget and redirect any extras to India's poor.

Life savings are poured into weddings in India, with price tags up to \$75,000 not uncommon for affluent urban families hosting sometimes thousands of guests for sumptuous celebrations lasting for days.

The new proposal might force some families to rethink the fireworks and chandeliers, with a requirement that weddings exceeding 500,000 rupees (\$7,500) contribute 10 percent of the overall cost to poorer Indians for their own nuptials. Ranjan—who made headlines herself last year for riding a Harley Davidson to parliament—said growing up with six sisters she was troubled by the pressure on her parents to spend big. "I have seen people spend two million rupees (\$30,000) just on dinner for wedding guests. People boast that we will serve 15 types of sweets brought from four states," she told AFP yesterday. "These days marriages are more about showing off your wealth. Why should poor families be put under pressure to spend so much?"

Her private members bill has been listed for discussion when parliament convenes on March 9, but such proposals must clear many hurdles to become law.

Opulent weddings attract intrigue and disgust in India, where poor families can bankrupt themselves trying to meet the expectations of relatives and friends. A mining tycoon lavished \$75 million on his daughter's wedding in November even as India was reeling from a painful cash shortage caused by a ban on high-value banknotes. Guests received their invitations on digital screens with moving images of the couple, who tied the knot in a royal palace knees-up complete with dancers flown in from Brazil.

The ostentatious affair, covered closely in the press, provoked outrage as banks ran out of cash and Indians struggled to pay for their basic needs. — AFP



NEW DELHI: Newly-married Indian man Rohit Aggarwal (right) is watched by relatives as he leads his wife Shally Aggarwal (second right) to their home after visiting a temple in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP



CHENNAI: All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) party leader Edappadi Palanisamy (C) gestures as he pays his respects at the memorial for former state chief minister Jayalalithaa Jayaram after being sworn in as the Chief Minister of the state of Tamil Nadu in Chennai yesterday. — AFP

JAILED LEADER'S ALLY TAKES REINS IN SOUTH INDIA STATE

PALANISAMY MUST SEEK TRUST VOTE IN 15 DAYS

NEW DELHI: An ally of disgraced Indian politician VK Sasikala was yesterday appointed the next leader of Tamil Nadu state, ending a weeks-long succession war marked by bitter in-fighting and plot twists. Edappadi Palanisamy took the reins of the ruling party after Sasikala, who was on the verge of becoming chief minister of the southern state, was spectacularly hauled off to prison for graft.

She had already been nominated for the top job before she was convicted Tuesday of amassing illegal assets worth \$10 million, barring her from holding office for a decade. Palanisamy, 63, was cleared for the top job after receiving Sasikala's blessing and a majority vote from the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam par-

ty. "The governor has also requested the chief minister designate Edappadi K. Palanisamy seek the vote of confidence of the assembly within fifteen days," the governor's office said in a statement.

Palanisamy, who served as a senior minister in previous governments, will be sworn in later Thursday. He emerged as the frontrunner after Tuesday's bombshell court verdict shattered Sasikala's political ambitions.

Tamil Nadu, one of India's most prosperous states, was plunged into political crisis after its long-serving chief minister Jayalalithaa Jayaram died suddenly in December. Her close aide Sasikala—a one-time video cassette seller who has never held political office or stood for election—emerged as

the heir apparent until a rebellion by an aspirational party colleague blocked her ascent.

She skipped Tuesday's court hearing and instead stayed at a Chennai resort with several dozen legislators over fears her opponents' camp might try and poach them before her investiture.

The corruption case dates back to the late 1990s, when Jayalalithaa and Sasikala were accused of profiting from the chief minister's office and acquiring wealth beyond their income.

They were jointly accused of illegally amassing bungalows, luxury cars, tea estates and vast quantities of gold worth the equivalent of \$10 million. Sasikala had spent nearly a month in the same Bangalore prison in 2014 before being let out on bail. — AFP