

Quattrocchi: Catch me if you can

The Minister for Science and Technology, Kapil Sibal, in his interview with NDTV categorically said that his government had not tried to hide anything in relation to Ottavio Quattrocchi's detention in Argentina. In fact he went a step further and said that it wasn't the government's business to keep the public informed about the nitty-gritties regarding the case as long as the broad picture was available.

With all due respect to the Hon'ble Minister he couldn't have been more wrong. The government should have immediately made public the news of Quattrocchi's detention simply because the people have the right to know. It is because they did not do so that I am forced to believe that the government was deliberately trying to hush up the entire incident. It is clear now that both the government and the CBI knew about Quattrocchi's detention on February 6th and therefore it is quite apparent that initially they were trying to cover up the whole thing.

Quattrocchi was detained in Argentina after Interpol had alerted the local authorities about his presence in their country. This was because Quattrocchi's name was listed in the Interpol's Red Corner Notice. It was on the CBI's request that his name was put there in the first place. In 1997 a Non Bailable Warrant was issued against Ottavio Quattrocchi in connection with the infamous Bofors scandal that had rocked Indian politics in the 1980's. Since then he has managed to evade the Indian authorities and previous attempts by the Indian government to get him extradited have gone in vain. In 2004 and then again in 2005 when the Delhi High Court cleared Rajiv Gandhi and subsequently the Hinduja Brothers of any involvement or misdealings in the Bofors case, it seemed that Quattrocchi had finally beaten his past. But holidaying with his wife in Argentina the Italian businessman found out the hard way that when it comes to things Indian karma had a funny way of catching up. Now, on request by the Indian government, the Argentine authorities, although having given him bail, have detained him in their country and have impounded his passport. A CBI team has already landed in the South American country with the necessary documents to get Quattrocchi extradited to India which the Argentineans say will take at least another 15 days to process. Currently India and Argentina do not have any extradition pact between them.

Although the courts here have cleared Rajiv Gandhi, the Hinduja's and even Bofors of any corruption and related charges the CBI still believes that Ottavio Quattrocchi holds the key to unraveling the 20 year old case shrouded in political deceit. They believe that Quattrocchi could open up a whole box of new evidences and names that will prove them right once and for all. It is needless to say that the court rulings in 2004 and 2005 have been embarrassing for them. So in a way this is their chance to redeem themselves and win back some respect.

But the question still remains as to why did the Congress initially want to hush things up? After all the Bofors case is ancient history. Not quite. The truth is that this is the one case that is the Congress's underbelly. The one case that they would do anything to bury. This was their greatest debacle in the 80's and was practically the biggest reason that lost them the elections in 1989. Plus it is the Bofors scandal along with the '84 Sikh riot that make up the two biggest incidents in Indian history that the Congress wishes that they had nothing to do with. It is but obvious that these two things become the greatest weapons in the hands of the opposition and it is not at all surprising that they have used this as an excuse to hold up parliament in the last few days. As far as not telling the people about Quattrocchi's detention, I don't think the Congress intended to keep it under wraps forever. If that was the case and people found out later then all hell would break loose. My guess is

that they simply wanted to delay it long enough so that it did not become an issue in the assembly elections in the three states. On hindsight it did not do them any good but it could have been worse.

To get the ball rolling Quattrocchi has to be extradited to India but that for the moment seems to be a task in itself. There seems to be a huge language barrier between the Argentine authorities and the CBI team that has landed there. What is even more confusing and not to mention funny is that the public prosecutor who had been appointed by the Argentine authorities to represent India in the extradition case doesn't know a single word of English and came to know about his appointment last Tuesday whereas officially he was appointed on February 10th. So basically it is an extremely chaotic situation down there and the CBI team and the Indian mission in Argentina have their hands full. With all this confusion and chaos there is every bit the possibility that Quattrocchi might once again slip through our fingers.

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