

Report from New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Mrs. Gandhi goes to Libya

There is every indication that the Libyan dictator delivered an ultimatum to the Non-Aligned Movement chairman.

It appears that the "secret mission" of Colonel Qaddafi's wife, Sophia, to New Delhi in February may have been decisive in the Indian prime minister's 27-hour visit to Tripoli, the first ever by any Indian head of state or prime minister. While Mrs. Gandhi's April 7-10 visit to Libya and Tunisia was preceded by press discussion of a "new Indian move" to resolve the Iran-Iraq war, Iran's deputy foreign minister Shaik ul Islam had told Mrs. Gandhi just days before she left Delhi that Iran would accept no mediation of any kind in the 42-month-old war.

Then, too, the trip was cut in half—Egypt and Algeria were on the original agenda—due to the crisis in Punjab, where separatist terrorism has sharply escalated. The Tunisian stopover was clearly kept for the sake of "balance"—but the question remained, why should the prime minister of India visit Libya at all at this time?

India and Libya are on opposite sides of many crucial issues, as is reflected in India's good relations with Egypt and Iraq, and its staunch support for Yassir Arafat's leadership of the PLO.

Mrs. Gandhi answered this question on her return: The purpose had been to strengthen bilateral ties and honor longstanding invitations, she told the press. "Not going would have caused misunderstandings," the prime minister added with characteristic bluntness. Otherwise Mrs. Gandhi's comments were limited to acknowledging that "Nobody has a way out at the moment," on the Gulf war and the Palestinian-Lebanon crises.

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) chairman was not inclined to discuss Qaddafi's views, diplomatically parrying questions on this line. The fact that there was no joint communiqué or statement issued following two rounds of talks, one with aides and one for an hour and a half alone, speaks for itself.

Apart from the official low key, there are indications that the Libyan dictator issued an ultimatum to the Indian prime minister and NAM chairman: Drop your support of Egypt, Iraq and Arafat and back the Syria-Libya-Iran axis, or else!

This is one interpretation given to the pointed remarks of Qaddafi at the banquet in Mrs. Gandhi's honor on April 7. "The extensive economic cooperation between India and Libya is not matched by cooperation in the political field," Qaddafi said. Newsmen accompanying the prime minister described this as the sounding of an "ominous note" and reported that Mrs. Gandhi and her entourage were "puzzled" by it.

There is no question that India's economic stake in Libya—the sum and substance of the two countries' "bilateral relations"—is a sensitive leverage point. Already the screws have been turned, ostensibly on the ground of Libya's weakened balance of payments position. For months many of the 50,000 Indians working in Libya, a large portion of them professionals, have not been paid at all. In addition, the earnings they are allowed to repatriate have been reduced from 90% to 50%.

The economic ties were on shaky ground to begin with. In 1978, when Libyan relations with Pakistan soured, allegedly over Pakistan's refusal to assist with "the Islamic bomb," staff major Mohammed Jalloud, Qaddafi's younger brother, made a visit to India and indicated that Libya was willing to forget about India's "crimes" in connection with the liberation of Bangladesh. A Joint Commission was set up which has since overseen nearly \$3 billion worth of project contracts completed or in hand, including power stations and other construction.

Although the current economic irritants were reportedly not brought up in the official talks, a meeting of the Indo-Libyan Joint Commission will be convened in Tripoli in May. This may give some further clue to the meaning of Qaddafi's banquet table remarks.

Otherwise Qaddafi gave Mrs. Gandhi an earful in public, including informing her that his Libya was "the driving force in the throbbing spirit of the Arab world." It is not known whether in private he reiterated his assertion of a year ago (in an interview with a West German anarchist publication) that Indira was a "Hitler in disguise." Nor is it known just what Mrs. Gandhi told Qaddafi.

But since actions speak louder than words, it is significant that just hours after leaving the colonel's company, Mrs. Gandhi had an unscheduled meeting with Yassir Arafat in Tunis. It is also significant that Egyptian President Mubarak's personal envoy has just returned to New Delhi—he visited in March when the prime minister's trip was being planned—for further talks.

As for Qaddafi's peace-making potential, the recent reminder in London of his government's commitment to terrorism should remove any illusions that Mr. Bhandari's Indian External Affairs Ministry staff may have had.