



IN TODAY'S PAPER

Front Page
Nation
Calcutta
Bengal
Opinion
International
Business
Sports
Sudoku
Sudoku New **BETA**
Crossword
Jumble
Gallery
Horse Racing
Press Releases
Travel

WEEKLY FEATURES

7days
Graphiti
Knowhow
Jobs
Telekids
Careergraph
Personal TT

CITIES AND REGIONS

Metro
Northeast
Jharkhand

ARCHIVES

Since 1st March, 1999

THE TELEGRAPH

- About Us
- Advertise
- Feedback
- Contact Us

Front Page > Nation > Story

 [email this page](#)  [Print this page](#)



Kasab judge 'out of jail' and promoted

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT



Mumbai, May 8: Sentencing Ajmal Kasab to the gallows has earned judge M.L. Tahaliyani quick release from "jail".

The additional principal judge, who presided over the special 26/11 court housed in Arthur Road prison for security reasons, has been promoted to principal judge of the city civil and sessions court in Mumbai.

His promotion came a day after he handed his first-ever death penalty, to Kasab, on Thursday. As the henna-haired, 46-year-old Sindhi took over his new assignment at the sessions court in south Mumbai yesterday, he joked: "I am relieved to be out of jail."

Ajmal Kasab

Tahaliyani received a warm welcome from his new staff after taking over charge from M.T. Joshi, who has been transferred to Nanded as civil and sessions judge.

This was Tahaliyani's second promotion during the year-long trial: he had been elevated from additional sessions judge to additional principal judge a few months ago. If the promotions came fast, the judge himself was no less prompt, delivering one of the quickest verdicts in a terror case in India.

The teetotaler and vegetarian has built a reputation as a judge impatient with adjournments — a valuable trait in a judicial system groaning under a huge backlog — and usually does not allow lawyers to waste time.

In the courtroom, the judge had often tried to lighten the atmosphere in his own way. For instance, he had picked up a pistol placed as exhibit and pointed it at Kasab, saying: "I was in the NCC, and once wanted to be in the army."

He, however, had also shown a sharp eye for political correctness, once stopping Kasab's lawyer K.P. Pawar from making a comment that could have caused controversy on the streets.

Swiftly erasing the argument from the records, Tahaliyani asked Pawar "don't you want to go home safely?" and told the media not to report the erased argument.

The 26/11 case would have revived old memories for Tahaliyani, who had seen Kasab's former defence counsel Abbas Kazmi and Nikam fight it out in the Gulshan Kumar murder case a decade ago.

This was one of two high-profile murder trials he had presided over, the other being the case of textile union leader Datta Samant, but he had only handed out life terms.

Tahaliyani belongs to Rajasthan but had moved with his family to Maharashtra's eastern Chandrapur district as a schoolboy. He did his BCom from Nagpur and earned a law degree from Gondia's NMD College.

He practised in Gondia and Chandrapur before being appointed government pleader at Sironcha in Gadchiroli, the Maoist-affected district bordering Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh.

Since 1987, he has worked as a metropolitan magistrate at Mumbai's Bandra court, as chief metropolitan magistrate at the Esplanade court, as additional sessions judge (1997) and civil and sessions judge (2000), and as registrar (inspection) of Bombay High Court.



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