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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 27-2-2024

China moved military forces in disregard of agreements: Jaishankar on border row in eastern Ladakh

EAM describes the rise of India and China as 'significant' in the global geopolitical scenario

PTI

New Delhi, India and China are rising and the two countries, in the process, are changing the world order, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said on Monday. Jaishankar, citing talks between leadership of the two countries in Mamallapuram and Wuhan, said India tried to maintain an "equilibrium" in the ties through diplomacy, but the relations took a different turn following China's military build-up along the Line of Actual Control in 2020 in violation of laid down norms. The external affairs minister, speaking at a media summit organised by the TV9 Network, described the rise of India and China as "significant" in the global geopolitical scenario.

"If you were to list three or four really big things which have changed in the last 20-25 years, I think most people would agree it would be the rise of China and the rise of India," he said, replying to a question.

"You can say China started it much earlier because our own politics here delayed the era of reform. That's okay. What's done is done. But there is no question, both countries are rising and for world politics, this poses a very interesting problem," he said.

"The problem is this: both are changing the world order by their rise. So each one has an impact vis-a-vis the world. But they also happened to be neighbours. So their relationship is also changing while it is changing vis-a-vis the rest of the world," Jaishankar added.

The external affairs minister argued that the situation, therefore, is making it "very complicated to create an equilibrium". They were part of "equilibrium maintenance exercise", Jaishankar said when specifically asked about the informal summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in the Chinese city of Wuhan in 2018 and Mamallapuram in 2019.

"We tried to maintain that equilibrium naturally—first through diplomacy. So what you saw in Wuhan and Mamallapuram, etc was that equilibrium maintenance exercise," he said.

"But what happened in 2020 was, China for whatever reason chose to move military forces in disregard of agreements. That called for a different response for the equilibrium," he said.

"The logical thing for us to do, which is what we did, was we moved our forces and in a very big way. So from 2020, you have an equilibrium, one part of which is the military posture in the border areas, one part of it today obviously is the political relationship impacted by this border situation," he said.

"One part of it is also the economic measures that we have taken," he added.

Jaishankar said the Modi government believes that interests of the country's working class, small enterprises and small industries must be protected against "unfair competition".

"Our effort today is to build our deep strengths. We have to build our digital capabilities, our telecom, our manufacturing, our pharma industry, our health self-sufficiency, our defence industry, our ability to deploy on the border which you can only do if you build infrastructure," he said.

Jaishankar suggested that India's annual average expenditure on the border with China was about Rs 3,500 crore till 2014.

Today, it is almost Rs 15,000 crore, he said.

There was a neglect of the border infrastructure, he said, adding "you cannot defend the border if you do not build infrastructure there".

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 22-2-2024

Border talks inconclusive as Chinese army refuses to disengage along LAC in eastern Ladakh

The Chinese army is said to have hardened its stand and continue to resist Delhi's demand for disengagement from transgression points in the Depsang Plains and Demchok along Line of Actual Control in eastern Ladakh, sources in the security establishment have said
Special Correspondent, New Delhi

The fresh round of military talks between India and China has yet again failed to achieve any breakthrough.

The Chinese army is said to have hardened its stand and continue to resist Delhi's demand for disengagement from transgression points in the Depsang Plains and Demchok along Line of Actual Control in eastern Ladakh, sources in the security establishment have said.

"There was no forward movement during the fresh round of talks as the Chinese army refused to budge from disengaging from the Depsang Plains and Demchok, which are strategically crucial for India," a security official attached to the Union home ministry told **The Telegraph**.

India's foreign ministry on Wednesday said in a statement that the 21st round of India-China corps commander-level meeting was held at the Chushul-Moldo border meeting point on February 19.

So far, the talks between the two armies have crossed over 270 hours since the first talks took place on June 6, 2020.

"The discussions built on the previous rounds, seeking complete disengagement in the remaining areas along the LAC in eastern Ladakh as an essential basis for the restoration of peace and tranquillity in the India-China border areas. The two sides shared their perspectives on this in the talks held in a friendly and cordial

atmosphere,” the statement from the external affairs ministry said.

“The two sides have agreed to maintain communication on the way ahead through the relevant military and diplomatic mechanisms. They also committed to maintaining peace and tranquillity on the ground in the border areas in the interim.”

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 24-2-2024

‘Finding equilibrium in ties a test for both India, China’

HT Correspondent

One of the biggest challenges for both India and China will be to arrive at an equilibrium and then maintain it, external affairs minister S Jaishankar said on Friday against the backdrop of the dragging standoff between the two sides on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Instead of getting caught up in “mind games” that this is an issue between just the two countries, India should be confident to “leverage” the international system to find the best possible outcome, Jaishankar said while participating in a session at the Raisina Dialogue, India’s flagship conference on geopolitics and geo-economics.

Jaishankar also mounted a strong defence of Russia, a close strategic partner of India, in response to a question from a panellist on whether Russia was becoming a junior partner of China because of its isolation since the invasion of Ukraine. Russia, with its tradition of statecraft, would never put itself into a “single relationship of an overwhelming nature”, the foreign minister said.

He reiterated that the immediate issue between India and China was Beijing’s decision to make a departure from border agreements put in place in the late 1980s, in terms of “how they behaved on the border and there’s a pushback from our side”. He was referring to the military face-off in Ladakh sector of the LAC that began almost four years ago.

“I think... arriving at equilibriums, then maintaining [and] refreshing those, is going to be the one of the biggest challenges for both countries. It’s not going to be easy,” Jaishankar said. Pointing to the possibility of “mind games” suggesting that this is an issue only between India and China, he said there are other factors to be harnessed to get “better terms on an equilibrium”.

Without going in for solutions that give a competitive country a veto over India’s policy choices, New Delhi should be “confident enough to leverage the international system to create the best possible outcome”, he added.

India and China have arrayed about 60,000 troops each in Ladakh sector since the LAC standoff began in May 2020. The Indian side has insisted that bilateral ties cannot be normalised till there is peace and tranquillity along the LAC.

Jaishankar also sought to question the position adopted by the West against Russia, and in the context of Russia-China relations, said: “On the one hand, you have people whose sets of policies bring the two together and then you say, beware of them coming together.”

Need to engage Russia Russia is turning more to Asia or other parts of the world because a lot of doors have been shut to it in the West. “It’s makes sense to give Russia multiple options. If we railroad Russia into a single option and say that’s really bad, because that’s the outcome, then you are making it a kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy,” he said.

It is important for other countries, especially in Asia, to engage Russia, a “power with an enormous tradition of statecraft” that would never put itself into a “single relationship of an overwhelming nature”, he added.

Jaishankar responded to a question about the need to reform world bodies such as the UN by saying there has been some progress with the emergence of different models to make changes. After considering these models, the world community will have to decide on the next step, which is still not clear. The expansion of the G20 through the inclusion of the African Union should serve as a lesson to the UN about the need to enlarge the permanent membership of the Security Council, he said. Besides India’s G20 presidency that displayed its leadership abilities to a globalised society, the country has also emerged as the first responder during incidents occurring in the region between East Africa and Australia, Jaishankar said.

At a time of intense competition between China and the US, countries such as India that aren’t “embedded in a pre-existing structure” are both expanding options but trying to forge something common with other like-minded states, he said. “A lot of countries will now try to have multiple options and even as they do that, they will form combinations of their own,” he added.

Jaishankar participated in the session along with representatives of think tanks from Australia, Nigeria, the UK and the US.

“India has never publicly criticised Russia’s actions in Ukraine and it ramped up the purchase of discounted Russian crude despite initial pressure from the West. While India never voted in favour of several resolutions on Ukraine at UN bodies, it has repeatedly called for an end to the conflict and a return to the path of dialogue and diplomacy,” said Sameer Patil, a Mumbai-based security analyst, adding that Jaishankar’s remarks were an acknowledgement of the fact that the constant pushback on Russia by the West will only draw it closer to China, which will complicate India’s options.

“On the other hand, Jaishankar’s comments on China are a recognition that India-China relations are headed for a long period of freeze, which is only going to further harden India’s approach,” he said.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 21-2-2024

US remains engaged with India on Pannun case: US official Richard Verma Rezaul H Laskar

NEW DELHI: The US will remain engaged with India on the alleged involvement of an Indian official in a thwarted plot to kill Khalistani leader Gurpatwant Singh Pannun and looks forward to the findings of an Indian committee investigating the matter, US deputy secretary of state Richard R Verma said on Tuesday. Verma, who served as the US envoy in New Delhi during 2015-17, acknowledged that the Indian side has taken the matter “very seriously” but didn’t go into details. At the same time, he said the overall India-US relationship is “surging forward at a pace and scale” that many people couldn’t have predicted a few years ago.

“We raised our concerns with the government of India. There is a committee of inquiry looking into the matter and we will stay engaged with the government and look forward to their findings. And they’ve taken it very seriously,” Verma said while responding to a question on Pannun at an interactive session at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF).

An indictment filed by US prosecutors in a Manhattan court last November alleged that Indian national Nikhil Gupta, acting on the instructions of an unnamed Indian official, contacted a person whom he believed to be a criminal associate for help in killing Pannun on American soil.

However, the person contacted by Gupta was a confidential source working with US law enforcement. According to the indictment, this source introduced Gupta to a purported hitman, who was an undercover US law enforcement officer. Gupta is currently in jail in the Czech Republic, where a judge is examining his challenge to a court ruling that he can be extradited to the US.

The Indian side has set up a high-level committee to examine inputs provided by the US though nothing has been made public so far about its findings. Pannun, a leader of the banned Sikhs for Justice (SFJ), has already been declared a terrorist by India.

The murder-for-hire case, as the matter has come to be known, has emerged as an irritant in bilateral relations even as India and the US have significantly enhanced cooperation in key areas such as emerging technologies and joint development of military hardware such as engines for the next generation of Indian combat jets.

Verma, who handles management and resources in the US state department and was speaking on the theme “The long view from DC: The India-US partnership”, appreciated the role being played by India in securing the Red Sea following a string of attacks on merchant shipping by Iran-backed militias. Referring to Iran’s funding and support for proxy groups across the Middle East, Verma said one such group is attacking and damaging commercial vessels on a route critical to the

free flow of goods between South Asia and the Middle East and beyond. Such attacks will be “incredibly destabilising” if they are allowed to continue as the “new normal”.

“We appreciate everything India has been doing in the Red Sea with its navy and the incredible support they have provided. I am grateful to all of our US military partners or other coalition partners that have joined Operation Prosperity Guardian and so many other efforts to ensure that shipping lane is open,” he said. The end goal of the US-India partnership is not the forging of a treaty alliance, the two sides need to enhance trade and security cooperation, and do more in areas such as export control reform, Verma said. Verma described former US president Bill Clinton’s visit to India in 2000 as a turning point in bilateral ties and listed several figures to demonstrate how the relationship had changed. Bilateral trade has risen from \$20 billion in 2000 to \$200 billion and sales of defence hardware have increased to \$24 billion. The US issued more than one million visas to Indians last year and currently hosts 270,000 Indian students.

Responding to a question on the difference in the positions of India and the US on the Ukraine conflict, Verma referred to a “complicated history” and said the leaders of both countries have called for the protection of territorial integrity, standing up for the rule of law and minimising the humanitarian impact. “I read a number of different statements and I weave them together, but we have a set of different responsibilities with our NATO partners. We’re differently situated and we are going to continue to do everything we can to defend our friends and partners in Ukraine,” he said. India-US security cooperation will become more important in the years ahead and building collective capabilities, increasing information-sharing, and improving maritime domain awareness and interoperability will “ensure India continues to be a provider of net security across the Indo-Pacific region and beyond”, Verma said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 29-2-2024

India-US Homeland Security Dialogue: Cooperation in combating terror, money laundering discussed

The meeting was held against the backdrop of row over alleged assassination attempt on top Khalistani separatist Gurpatwant Singh Panun

PTI

New Delhi, Cooperation in combating terrorism, money laundering, organised crime and activities of pro-Khalistani elements in America were discussed at the India-US Homeland Security Dialogue held here on Wednesday, sources said.

While the Indian delegation was led by Union Home Secretary Ajay Bhalla, the US delegation was headed by

his counterpart Kristie Canegallo, Acting Deputy Secretary, US Department of Homeland Security.

An official statement said during the dialogue, both sides reviewed ongoing cooperation in counter-terrorism and security domains, which has been a key pillar of the India-US strategic partnership.

In this context, they discussed steps that can be taken to bolster bilateral efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism, drug trafficking, organised crime and ensure transportation security, the statement said.

Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening the vibrant people-to-people ties between the two countries, by taking steps to enable safe and legal migration, counter illegal migration, human trafficking, money laundering, cyber-crimes and misuse of the cyber domain for illegal activities including terror-financing.

The co-chairs reiterated their keen interest in consolidating the mutually beneficial collaboration between the respective law enforcement agencies through exchange of information, capacity building, technical assistance and regular meetings of sub-groups set-up under the framework of the Homeland Security Dialogue, the statement said.

The Indian delegation is believed to have raised the issue of the activities of the pro-Khalistani elements on the US soil and also their active support and funding to the separatist elements based in India, the sources said.

The meeting was held against the backdrop of a row over the alleged assassination attempt on top Khalistani separatist Gurpatwant Singh Panun, a US citizen. The US has been demanding accountability in the matter.

India is also seeking action against the pro-Khalistan elements involved in the July 2023 attack on the Indian consulate in San Francisco, the sources said.

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) has identified more than 50 pro-Khalistan activists who had attacked the consulate in San Francisco.

New Delhi is also pushing for the extradition of 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks accused Tahawwur Hussain Rana. A US court had dismissed Rana's appeal against extradition.

The dialogue concluded with signing of the following document which will further deepen bilateral security cooperation: A Memorandum of Cooperation on law enforcement training between the US Federal Law Enforcement Training Centre and India's Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel National Police Academy.

Both sides agreed to hold the next round of the senior officials' Homeland Security Dialogue in Washington DC at a mutually convenient date. The last India-US homeland security dialogue was last held in January 2022.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 16-2-2024 **India-Qatar ties growing stronger and stronger, says PM Modi; thanks Emir for release of 8 jailed Indians**

The discussions centred around bolstering bilateral relations, with focus on deepening cooperation in areas of trade and investment, energy and people-to-people ties

PTI

Doha, India-Qatar ties are growing “stronger and stronger” and both sides are looking at collaborating in futuristic sectors, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Thursday following his talks with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani that came days after the Gulf nation freed eight former Indian Navy personnel who were sentenced to death.

Modi described his meeting with the Emir as “wonderful” and said ways to deepen cooperation across various sectors were discussed.

“Had a wonderful meeting with HH Sheikh @TamimBinHamad. We reviewed the full range of India-Qatar relations and discussed ways to deepen cooperation across various sectors. Our nations also look forward to collaborating in futuristic sectors which will benefit our planet,” Modi said on 'X'.

The discussions centred around bolstering bilateral relations, with a focus on deepening cooperation in areas of trade and investment, energy, space, cultural and people-to-people ties.

“India and Qatar ties are growing stronger and stronger!” Modi said in another post along with photographs of ceremonial welcome accorded to him in Doha.

External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal described the meeting between Modi and the Emir as “productive” and said the prime minister thanked the Qatari leader for the welfare of the Indian community in that country.

Modi arrived in this Qatari capital city last night after concluding a two-day visit to the United Arab Emirates.

“The two leaders held wide-ranging discussions on bolstering bilateral relations, with a focus on deepening trade & investment, energy, space, cultural & people to people ties,” Jaiswal said on 'X'.

“They also exchanged perspectives on regional and global issues. PM thanked Amir for the welfare of the Indian community in Qatar,” he said.

Shortly after his arrival in Doha last night, Modi met Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani. Abdulrahman is Qatar's foreign minister as well.

“The two leaders exchanged views on expanding bilateral cooperation in sectors such as trade, investment, energy, finance, and technology,” the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said.

“They also discussed recent regional developments in West Asia and emphasized the importance of upholding peace and stability in the region and beyond,” it said.

Following the meeting, the Qatari prime minister hosted a dinner for Modi. The Indian prime minister’s second visit to Qatar came days after Qatar released the Indians. Meanwhile, Modi thanked Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani for the release of eight Indian nationals, who were sentenced to death after being arrested here in August 2022.

Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra said at a media briefing that Modi thanked the Emir for his support for the welfare of the Indian community in the Gulf nation.

“The prime minister thanked the Emir for his support for the welfare of the Indian community, and in this regard, expressed his deep appreciation to the Emir for the release of eight Indian nationals of Al-Dahra company. We are extremely gratified to see them back in India,” Kwatra said.

The Navy veterans were on October 26 given death sentences by Qatar’s Court of First Instance. The Court of Appeal in the Gulf nation on December 28 commuted the capital punishment and sentenced them to jail terms for varying durations.

In December, PM Modi had met the Qatari Emir on the sidelines of the COP28 Summit in Dubai and discussed the “well-being of the Indian community” in Qatar.

The former Indian Navy personnel apparently faced charges of espionage, but neither the Qatari authorities nor New Delhi made the charges against them public.

The trade and energy ties between India and Qatar are on an upswing. Qatar is the largest supplier of LNG to India, accounting for over 48 per cent of India’s global LNG imports.

India’s Petronet has renewed a contract to buy 7.5 million tonnes of LNG from Qatar annually from 2029 for 20 years and it is being billed as the largest-ever extension of super-chilled fuel in the world.

The original 25-year deal was signed in 1999 and supplies started in 2004. India-Qatar cooperation has been steadily growing in diverse sectors over the last few years.

Prime Minister Modi paid his first visit to Doha in June, 2016. The visit provided an opportunity to both sides to engage at the highest level, and impart fresh momentum to the bilateral ties.

It was the highest level visit from India to Qatar since the visit of then prime minister Manmohan Singh in November 2008.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 16-2-2024

India’s Gulf strategy wins: Acquittal in Qatar, \$78B LNG deal and more

Pankaj Saran

An unfortunate chapter in India’s relations with Qatar has come to an end. The return of the former India Navy officers to India, safe and sound, and their acquittal is a

most welcome development. There is a palpable sense of relief. Qatar is a unique country in the Gulf that has always punched well above its weight. It is a tiny piece of territory abutting the vast expanse of Saudi Arabia and Oman that has the highest per capita income in the region. It has successfully harnessed its mammoth oil and gas wealth to develop its infrastructure at a pace and scale that is nothing short of miraculous. Qatar’s grandeur was in evidence during the FIFA World Cup in 2022. Politically, Qatar has its fingers in several pies. It flaunts its risk-taking appetite. It has been in the eye of the intra-Gulf political storm when its relations with Saudi Arabia broke down and it was boycotted by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on charges of supporting Islamist and radical groups that threatened moderate regimes. It has been an outlier in the Arab world by maintaining significant links with Iran and yet hosts an American military base. In recent years, it played an active role in supporting the US project of exiting Afghanistan and installing the Taliban in Kabul. It is once again involved in doing what it does best — playing the role of a mediator, this time in the most vexatious conflict between Israel and Hamas. It has, in the form of Al Jazeera, built the most powerful media tool that has shaken the Arab world.

Qatar’s confidence in its internal stability and social fabric is no less remarkable. There would scarcely be a country in which the proportion of foreigners is five times the number of its own citizens. Qatar has made a strategic choice to make Indians the largest pool of foreign workers in the country, who number 800,000 in a total population of less than 3 million. The Emir of Qatar and al Thani family are the first to acknowledge and applaud the contribution of Indians in the Qatar miracle. The source of Qatar’s success has been the al Thani family and the Emirs who have ruled Qatar with a firm hand. Successive Indian governments have worked to develop close ties with the Emirate. The first breakthrough was made by the visit of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Qatar in 2008. Relations have assumed new heights ever since the first visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2016. After the visit, there have been close, regular and high-level contacts. Relations have flourished in the areas of energy, investments, project exports, food and health security, civil aviation and significantly, defence and naval cooperation. Trade stands at \$18 billion. A \$78 billion deal for the import of LNG was signed a few days ago, ensuring that Qatar will play a critical role in India’s transition to a gas-based economy.

Against this background, the saga of the arrest of eight former Indian naval officers on charges of alleged espionage was an aberration and an inexplicable development. The charges against them in 2022 came as a surprise to India and were countered and contested. The case was handled between India and Qatar behind the scenes, given the high stakes involved. India’s

handling was mature and restrained, without falling into the temptation of hyperbole or display of public anger borne of deep concern for those arrested.

The resolution of the case is yet another example of how the government under Prime Minister Modi has managed to achieve positive outcomes in highly complex and sensitive situations with astute and quiet diplomacy. In this particular case, given the structure of the Qatari state, there is no doubt about the personal role that would have been played by the Prime Minister, supported by his senior-most advisers. The PM is now set to visit Qatar to convey his gratitude.

More fundamentally, the resolution of the case is a manifestation of the success of the government's Gulf and West Asia policy. The Gulf region has never been a greater priority among India's top leadership than it is today. The Prime Minister's visit to the UAE and the special status he is being accorded there is the most recent example of this. India has built deep and robust ties with Saudi Arabia, UAE and Oman while also building solid relations with Qatar. India has become a full member of the Combined Maritime Forces headquartered in Bahrain. The relationship with Israel has never been closer. Relations with Egypt have been energised, while high-level contacts have continued with Iran. These multidimensional partnerships, forged between equals, are bearing fruit in ways that directly promote India's national development and security priorities.

The writer is Member, National Security Advisory Board and former Deputy National Security Adviser.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 16-2-2024

Will not impact Dhaka-Moscow ties:

Mantytskiy

Hasina-Zelensky Meeting

Diplomatic Correspondent

Russian Ambassador Alexander Mantytskiy has said on Thursday that the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's meeting with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference will be no impact on Dhaka-Moscow relations.

"Western countries were negotiating with other countries to gain support for Ukraine's ceasefire proposal, but Russia does not support that proposal, we do understand that Zelensky will discuss his peace formula during the meeting with Bangladesh's Prime Minister, we welcomed Bangladesh's foreign policy dictum of friendship to all, malice towards none..we hope Bangladesh will keep up it," Alexander Mantytskiy told the diplomatic correspondent while replying to a question at DCAB Talk at Jatiya Press Club.

Earlier, on Wednesday, Foreign Minister Dr. Hasan Mahmud told the media on Wednesday that Bangladesh has accepted the Ukrainian president's request to meet the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the sideline of the Munich Security Conference. "Our position is US and

Western countries should not tell what Bangladesh will do. This will depend on Bangladesh. They should not interfere in Bangladesh," he said.

Bangladesh-Russia relations have proven to be resilient and strong both politically and economically, Russian Ambassador to Bangladesh Alexander Mantytskiy said judging the outcomes of the year 2023.

Correspondents Association, Bangladesh (DCAB) organized the event with its president, Nurul Islam Hasib, in the chair. General Secretary Ashiqur Rahman Apu also spoke on the occasion.

Russia and Ukraine have been at war, however, Bangladesh maintains strong relations with Russia, government has not tilted towards any side despite Western pressure in accordance with the foreign policy dictum of friendship to all, malice towards none.

The Russian ambassador welcomed Bangladesh's foreign policy and said: "We are not at war with the US. They have their own economic interests, we also have economic relations with Bangladesh."

At the UN and other multilateral platforms, Russia advocated for the peaceful development of all states based on the principles of sovereign equality and indivisible security, he said.

"Russia effectively thwarted plans for its international isolation while maintaining opportunities for respectful dialogue and pragmatic cooperation with the West," he said.

Russian Ambassador clarified Russia's stance on the Zelensky peace formula, saying that Zelensky's formula is a hypocrisy and lack of connection to reality.

"First, the Zelensky formula consists of a series of ultimatums targeting Russia. They are trying to force us to withdraw from the liberated territories and abandon Russians who voted to reunite with their homeland. Ultimatums of this kind cannot serve as a foundation for launching talks."

"Second, Ukraine has enacted a legal ban on holding talks with the Russian leadership. As long as this ban remains in place, discussing any proposals will not yield tangible results. Third, discussing a settlement in Ukraine without involving Russia is senseless. Fourth, Kyiv has been pushing the ultimatums contained in the Zelensky formula as the only possible solution with no room for alternatives.

"Fifth, Zelensky has been bombing civilian sites with cluster munitions in Belgorod, Donetsk and other Russian cities, intentionally killing civilians. The West has been supplying armaments to Kyiv, including cluster and depleted uranium bombs, and delivering more weapons, which does nothing but escalate hostilities and prolong the conflict," the ambassador said.

Replying to a question whether Russia followed India's policy on Bangladesh, the Ambassador said: "We follow our policy and it is written in our doctrine."

"Russia and India have differences on many issues and we follow our own policies here," he said, adding: "We do not see Bangladesh through the eyes of India."

On the Rohingya issue, the ambassador said Russia wanted the Rohingyas to return to their homeland.

"We think that no foreign country or NGO should interfere in this process. However, the situation has changed and problems have arisen in Myanmar. It is now uncertain when the repatriation process will begin," he said.

When asked why Russia sold arms to Myanmar, he said: "We are supplying arms. But at the same time, India and China are also supplying arms. We are ready to supply weapons to Bangladesh as well. These are high-quality weapons and this can be understood if we see the war in Ukraine. We have supplied arms to Bangladesh before... aeroplanes and many more."

Russian Ambassador Alexander Mantytskiy said in 2023, Bangladesh imported 2.7 million tons of grain from Russia. The Russian side is ready to expand the list of export items with edible oils, peas, chickpeas and lentils before Ramadan.

He said Russia makes a significant contribution to Bangladesh food security. Despite artificial and counterproductive obstacles created by the Western countries, Moscow continues to export to Bangladesh key agro-industrial products, mainly wheat and fertilizers.

"Energy has been the backbone of our cooperation. In 2023, Gazprom continued projects aimed at enhancing Bangladesh energy security. The construction of three additional wells on Bhola island was completed, bringing the total number of drilled wells to 20. The company's proposals for gas evacuation and exploration of new fields are under consideration."

He said there were more offers and projects in the pipeline, such as the supply of Russian LNG and crude oil for further local refining, Russian solar energy technologies, upgrade of local power stations, and more. "The Rooppur NPP flagship project is moving according to schedule."

Talking about recent milestones, he said there was the installation of a passive heat removal system at unit 2. "The first unit is expected to start pilot operation by the end of this year."

The Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant would make a considerable contribution to Bangladesh's economic development and energy security, the ambassador hoped.

"Rooppur is more than just a power plant. Dozens of Bangladeshi companies provide their services and materials for construction work."

Russia and Bangladesh relations have proven to be resilient and strong both politically and economically, the ambassador said.

"Together with Bangladeshi partners, we are eager to expand and diversify areas of mutual interest for the

sake of our peoples. It leaves no one doubt that we have all prerequisites for that and share the same commitment."

Speaking about economic cooperation, the Ambassador said Bangladesh remains Russia's second largest trade partner in South Asia after India.

In January-November 2023, the trade volume amounted to \$2.3 billion.

The Russian side is interested in diversification of its export basket by supplying machinery, equipment and technologies necessary for railway, road construction, building, metallurgy and other industrial spheres, said the envoy.

Instead of focusing on the achievements, local hype-seeking journalists are ready to undermine the epitome of our bilateral relations for short-lived considerations, said Mantytskiy.

DHAKA TRIBUNE, DHAKA 17-2-2024

Zelensky Invites Bangladesh to Join Ukraine formula that Russia Rejects

Ukraine has invited Bangladesh to join it in the implementation of the Ukrainian Peace Formula that Moscow, a close friend of Dhaka, rejects.

President Volodymyr Zelensky met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for the first time on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in Germany on Saturday. He also invited Bangladesh to take part in the inaugural Global Peace Summit. Sheikh Hasina, however, called upon all to find ways to stop wars as Bangladesh pursues a foreign policy of friendship to all and malice towards none.

According to Zelensky's office, he "thanked the Prime Minister of Bangladesh for supporting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, particularly within the UN, and emphasized the importance of Bangladesh's support for Ukrainian initiatives."

"Volodymyr Zelensky told the Prime Minister about Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression, the situation on the battlefield and the Ukrainian vision of a just peace based on the Ukrainian Peace Formula.

"The President invited the People's Republic of Bangladesh to join the implementation of the Formula and take part in the inaugural Global Peace Summit," read a statement from the Ukraine president's office. Zelensky informed the prime minister about "Ukraine's efforts to create an alternative grain corridor in the Black Sea and prevent Russia's attempts to undermine peaceful navigation in the Black Sea region." "The president of Ukraine and the prime minister of Bangladesh also discussed the prospects of establishing cooperation in the trade and economic sphere, in particular, the supply of Ukrainian agricultural products to this country."

Before the meeting, however, there had been speculations about the impact of Dhaka and Moscow

relations. Russian Ambassador in Dhaka Alexander Mantytskiy said on Monday that he hoped that the meeting would not have any impact on relations with Bangladesh.

"We hope that Bangladesh-Russia relations will improve," he had said, asserting Russia's rejection of the Ukraine Peace Formula. Russia had consistently criticized the Zelensky formula for its "shortcomings, hypocrisy and lack of connection to reality," he said. Meanwhile, the prime minister during the meeting with Zelensky called for finding a way to end the war. "Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina always says we are against all kinds of war. Today, she also discussed how the war can be stopped," Foreign Minister Dr Hasan Mahmud later said.

He said the two leaders also discussed how the attacks on innocent men and women in Gaza can be stopped. The prime minister reminded all that war cannot bring any wellbeing for anyone.

"The war cannot bring any welfare for the countries involved and their people who get affected ... others can be benefitted from the war," the prime minister was quoted as saying. In this connection, she also recalled her bitter memories of the sufferings Bangladesh's people and she herself endured during the country's War of Liberation in 1971.

She narrated her own inhuman suffering and the birth of her only son Sajeeb Wazed Joy under the captivity of the Pakistani occupation forces during the War. Bangladesh's foreign policy of keeping good relations with all figured prominently during the meeting, the foreign minister said.

Replying to a question, the foreign minister once again said that despite the meeting, relations with Russia will not at all be hampered. "Our relationship with Russia is very warm. Russia stood beside us during the Liberation War and played a pivotal role in rebuilding Bangladesh after the war," he recalled.

The prime minister left Dhaka on February 15 on a three-day official visit to join the Munich Security Conference. She will return home on Monday. This is her first official tour abroad since assuming office for a fourth consecutive term following the January 7 general elections.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 28-2-2024

Bangladesh-India cooperation is necessary: PM

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Tuesday said that cooperation between Bangladesh and India is necessary as they are close-door neighbours. She said this when the visiting Chief of the Air Staff of India Air Chief Marshal Vivek Ram Chaudhari called on her at her Sangsad Bhaban office here.

Mentioning that poverty is the main enemy in this region, Sheikh Hasina said that maximum resources are being spent to alleviate poverty. During the courtesy call

on, she also told the Indian air chief that Bangladesh has established Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Aviation and Aerospace University (BSMRAAU) where new human resources are being developed.

Prime Ministers Speechwriter Md. Nazrul Islam said this in a news briefing after the meeting.

The Indian air chief has assured the premier of extending all types of cooperation to build Smart Armed Forces in the Smart Bangladesh.

Talking about the "Forces Goal-2030" of Bangladesh, Vivek Ram Chaudhari said that they have taken initiative to conduct joint exercise alongside extending cooperation on training to Bangladesh Airforce personnel.

He also said that they are ready to extend all types of cooperation for the betterment of Bangladesh Air Force PMs Private Industry and Investment Adviser Salman Fazlur Rahman and Prime Ministers Principal Secretary M. Tofazzel Hossain Miah were present. — BSS

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 19-2-2024 **SHARING OF GANGES WATER**

What looms after 2026?

Bangladesh, should take the lead by becoming a party to Watercourse Conventions. It should also demand the application of existing international environmental agreements like the 1992 Convention on Biodiversity and the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

On May 16, 1976, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani led a massive long march from Rajshahi towards India's Farakka Barrage, demanding the demolition of the barrage constructed by the Indian government to divert the flow of Ganges water within its territory.

Asif Nazrul

In 1976, a mass procession led by a nearly 80-year-old peasant leader, Maulana Bhasani, from Dhaka to the Indo-Bangladesh Border drew huge attention from national and international media. It demonstrated a profound sense of deprivation among the people of Bangladesh against the unilateral operation of the Farakka Barrage by India, which allegedly killed the Ganges River and unsettled the lives of millions of Bangladeshis living downstream of the Ganges.

The Farakka issue quickly became a perennial irritant in Indo-Bangladesh relations. An internationally renowned expert, R.R. Baxter, was hired to prepare a document assessing Bangladesh's claims. Based on this assessment, a White Paper was published, and the issue was raised by Bangladesh in the UN General Assembly in 1977. Consequently, a five-year temporary agreement was concluded; however, it soon faltered, followed by a weaker legal arrangement (MoU), which raised more controversy on both sides of the border.

I went to SOAS, University of London in 1994 with a Commonwealth Scholarship to pursue a PhD on the international legal aspects of this conflict. Based on a

literature review, I found that there were examples of accommodating competing interests of the basin states of a shared river by observing the principles of international watercourse (or river) law. So, why had Bangladesh and India failed to do so, despite many years of protracted consultation and negotiations?

I tried to find answers to this question. In the absence of any “global codification” by intergovernmental bodies, the search for international law centered on applicable “customary rules.” The International Law Commission rapporteur assigned to codify those rules on the utilization of shared rivers into a global convention had already agreed in 1994 on the existence of such customary rules. However, there were other versions as well; a notable one was the 1970s proceedings of the Asian-African Legal Consultative Committee, comprising, among others, India, Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, which recorded its failure to agree on most of the drafts of customary rules placed for its consideration.

It therefore appeared doubtful whether the global customary rules of international watercourse law were “global” at all, or whether they, like some other branches of international law, were based almost entirely on European and American practice. For that reason, was their application in other areas, including in South Asia, still a debatable issue, and did this confusion have any impact on the resolution of the Ganges water dispute?

2

A closer look at the South Asian practice, however, reveals an encouraging picture. It shows that from an early period, most of the countries in this region recognized at least one applicable international law principle: the principle of equitable sharing or equitable utilization. Occasional references were also made to the principle of no harm, although it has implications that do not fully conform to the equitable principle.

For example, the equitable utilization principle provides for numerous factors of equity such as river condition, existing uses, dependent population, available alternatives, and the impact of the project, which can be used to assess whether the diversion by the Farakka Project was equitable or reasonable. However, this principle has not settled the hierarchy of those factors. Therefore, by selectively emphasizing those factors, arguments both for and against any planned measure such as the Farakka Project could be made.

But in accordance with the no harm principle, it would be very difficult to support such a project considering its harmful impact on the downstream areas.

Interestingly, the relation between these two substantive principles has not been fully resolved even in the global codification of international watercourse law in 1997. The 1997 Watercourse Convention simply suggests resolving disputes based on both these principles and

through compliance with a set of procedural obligations such as information sharing, consultation, and negotiation, etc.

However, there have been two important developments in the last few decades which, among other things, aim to place more emphasis on ensuring protection from potential harmful impacts of any planned measures on a shared river, specifically emphasizing the no-harm principle. The first is the emergence of the concept of treating an international watercourse as an indivisible natural resource, thus requiring a basin-wide approach for the utilization, development, and management of an international watercourse. The second is the growing legal recognition of the right of the river as a living entity, and therefore giving due regard to the environmental implications of the utilization of a watercourse. These require a much broader, holistic, and rational approach to dealing with international watercourses and provide wider opportunities for addressing the long-standing conflicts on the utilization of international watercourses.

With added optimism based on these developments, I recently embarked on updating my PhD (awarded in 1999) thesis. As the principles of comprehensive data sharing, integrated water resource management, and protection of the ecology of the watercourse continue to solidify, their importance in the renegotiation of the latest Ganges treaty of 1996, set to expire in 2026, has grown significantly.

The title of the thoroughly updated version of my PhD is “Sharing Ganges Water, Indo-Bangladesh Treaties, and International Law,” and it was published (under my academic name Md. Nazrul Islam) in February 2023 by University Press Limited.

3.

This book has compared the experience of negotiation of the Ganges agreements to the contemporary development of international law to determine the extent to which the basin states of the Ganges were prepared to learn from the advances in international law. It has also attempted to understand whether the Ganges dispute reflected non-compliance or a narrow application of international law.

First, it assesses whether the information exchanged between India and Pakistan (predecessor of Bangladesh before the latter’s liberation in 1971) during the early stage of the planning of the Farakka project was adequate to resolve the amount of water of the Ganges that constituted an equitable share for each country and the extent of the impact of the project. It should be mentioned that the irrigation and hydroelectric projects of the upper reaches of India and their impact on the availability of water to be shared between the Farakka project and Bangladesh at the downstream area were kept outside the purview of negotiations on the Ganges issue. What were its implications, and how did the

international law developed at that time entertain this question?

Second, the later agreements, including the 1996 Ganges Treaty (between Bangladesh and India), were premised on this limited information sharing and made an allocation of the Ganges water at an extreme downstream point between the Farakka project and Bangladesh without provisions for exchanging information on the use of Ganges water in the vast upstream areas in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in India. It was claimed that these arrangements were based on equity, fairness, and no harm. The crucial question raised in my book is, can the arrangement of sharing the 'residual' flow of a river (water left over after the unlimited upstream diversion) be made equitable or fair? Or ensure no harm to the downstream country? What were the rules of international law on such issues?

Third, in the case of the Ganges, the issue appeared more complex, since the river actually originated further upstream in Nepal. Can Nepal, therefore, be ignored in any sharing arrangement of the Ganges at its downstream point? How would it impact the sharing arrangement then? How different could it have been with the participation of Nepal?

If we examine the experience of implementing the Ganges agreements from 1977 to the present, it provides answers to many of these questions. The fact is that the Ganges negotiation began and continued on a faulty legal premise. It focused solely on the competing demands and uses in the downstream Ganges without linking these with the upstream uses of the river. The resulting agreements were unique in many respects. They were short-term or fixed-term, primarily centered around the Farakka project, and focused solely on the economic use of the Ganges, neglecting key environmental issues.

As a result, the agreements, including the long-term 1996 Treaty, have failed to fully achieve their goals of equity and no harm. The joint river commission assigned to monitor the implementation of the 1996 treaty meets irregularly, and the state parties have shown no interest in correcting its deficiencies. Regular complaints have been raised from both sides about the poor performance of the treaty.

Furthermore, negotiations on the sharing of other transboundary rivers (such as the Teesta) have not learned from the Ganges experience and have thus failed to produce any significant advancements. Most of these negotiations have followed the Ganges pattern, excluding other basin states, limiting data sharing and consultation to water availability at the tail end of the river, disregarding the need for maintenance of environmental flows, and failing to establish a powerful and autonomous river commission.

The 1996 Ganges treaty will expire in 2026. It also provided for conducting negotiations for sharing the

water of other common rivers based on equity and no harm principles. Unless it is renewed, there will be no negotiated arrangement for Ganges water sharing or agreed basis for negotiations on other rivers in the post-2026 period.

A modified Ganges Treaty involving all of its basin states (Nepal, India, and Bangladesh) should be concluded before it expires in 2026. It is high time to learn the lessons of the past and thus reposition the course of future negotiations, taking due account of the recent developments in international law that inspire integrated basin-wide development of rivers.

4.

Bangladesh and India (along with all the basin states of South Asia) should have a wider vision to understand that integrated, multilateral, and basin-wide water resource management would be a much better approach to accommodate the various needs of the basin states of any international river and to ensure its adequate protection. They need to understand that the equitable utilization or no-harm principles cannot be translated into reality without the equitable participation of all the basin states, comprehensive data sharing (including through participatory EIA) on all the actual and potential water uses, negotiated arrangements on that basis, continuous monitoring, and efficient conflict resolution mechanisms. In accomplishing these, they should respect and embrace the customary rules reflected in the 1997 Watercourse Convention and other relevant instruments. They should also consider the recent increasing focus on related environmental obligations, human rights aspects, and the need for an efficient institutional regime, as elaborated in the 1992 UNECE Watercourse Convention (global participation opened in 2015) and the 2004 ILA Berlin Rules, and as followed in some water-stressed regions in Asia and Africa such as the Mekong and Senegal basins.

As a vulnerable downstream region to nearly 54 rivers, Bangladesh, in particular, should take the lead by becoming a party to Watercourse Conventions. It should also demand the application of existing international environmental agreements like the 1992 Convention on Biodiversity and the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change, which contain corresponding provisions on the use of international watercourses. Bangladesh could thus influence other co-basin countries to realize that watercourses are precious natural resources that need to be utilized, developed, and managed through an efficient and comprehensive arrangement covering all the uses and involving all the stakeholder States. This realization is crucial for the long-term benefit of the region and the sustainability of the dependent ecosystems.

Dr Asif Nazrul is Professor and Chairman, Department of Law, University of Dhaka.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 27-2-2024
BD, US eager to create new chapter in
ties: FM

Diplomatic Correspondent

Bangladesh and United States have expressed willingness to create a new chapter in their relations.

"There is willingness from both sides. Together, we want to create a new chapter in our relations," Foreign Minister Dr Hasan Mahmud told reporters after his meeting with the visiting US delegation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Sunday noon.

The Foreign Minister also said the letter sent by US President Joe Biden to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is important to take forward the relations between the two countries. "It's a pleasure for us to talk about our shared priorities and ways for us to cooperating together in the future," Eileen Laubacher Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for South Asia, US National Security Council (NSC) told reporters in her very brief remarks.

Eileen Laubacher, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for South Asia, US National Security Council (NSC); Michael Schiffer, USAID Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Asia; and Afreen Akhter, US Department of State Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia, are on a three-day visit to Bangladesh.

"The discussions centred around exploring new avenues to deepening the existing relationship. Economic cooperation, trade and investment, Rohingya humanitarian response, climate change, and energy were in focus during the meeting," the Foreign Ministry said. Eileen Laubacher also said they value the relations with Bangladesh.

"We discussed with the Foreign Minister how our two countries can work on mutual interests, including economic development, security, refugees, climate, labor, and trade," said the US Embassy in a separate message after the meeting.

Bangladesh is an important partner in the Indo-Pacific region, it said.

Responding to a question regarding withdrawal of sanctions on RAB, the Foreign Minister said the US side has given five observations which Bangladesh will follow up.

He said the current situation in Myanmar has posed a security threat for Bangladesh and the region. "We discussed this issue."

Foreign Minister Hasan said they urged the US to ensure a ceasefire in Gaza.

Regarding Rashed Chowdhury, one of the killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who took shelter in the United States, Hasan said they raised the issue with the US delegation to send him back to Bangladesh. The US side has said the issue is pending with the US Justice Department. The three US officials, according to the US side, are visiting to discuss with the

government of Bangladesh ways to "strengthen diplomatic ties, address challenges, and promote a shared vision for the advancement of mutual interests in the Indo-Pacific region."

They also met Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen, civil society representatives, labour leaders, youth activists and those engaged in developing a free and uncensored media.

Foreign Minister Dr Hasan Mahmud said the letter sent by US President Joe Biden to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is important to take forward the relations between the two countries.

After the national election, the US in a statement on January 8 said, "Looking ahead, the United States remains committed to partnering with Bangladesh to advance our shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, to supporting human rights and civil society in Bangladesh, and to deepening our people-to-people and economic ties."

After the meeting, the US embassy in a media note said the United States "supports a prosperous, secure, and democratic Bangladesh. We discussed with the foreign minister how our two countries can work on mutual interests, including economic development, security, refugees, climate, labour and trade."

"Along with that, the country wants to work with Bangladesh to increase bilateral trade and investment, security cooperation, improve the labour environment, and combat climate change," he said. Their visit will also include meetings with youth activists and civil society leaders, labour organisers, and those engaged in developing a free and uncensored media, said the US Embassy. The foreign minister reiterated Bangladesh's steadfast position in favour of peace and against any form of war. He asked for US to use its leverage to achieve a permanent ceasefire in Gaza. Hasan also hoped for the Russia-Ukraine war to end.

Earlier, US President Joe Biden wrote to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressing his willingness to work together to achieve Bangladesh's economic goals. He also expressed willingness to partnering with Bangladesh on the shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

As the two countries embark on the next chapter of the US-Bangladesh partnership, Biden said he wants to convey the sincere desire of his administration to continue their work together on regional and global security, economic development, climate change and energy, global health, humanitarian support, especially for Rohingya refugees, and more.

"We have a long and successful history of working together to solve problems, and our strong people-to-people ties are the foundation of this relationship," the US President wrote to PM Sheikh Hasina.

The foreign ministry hopes that the Bangladesh-US relations would further be deepened and widened with the visit of the US officials.

According to the ministry, the letter sent by US President Joe Biden to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is important to take forward the relations between the two countries.

After the 7 January election, the US in a statement on 8 January said, "Looking ahead, the United States remains committed to partnering with Bangladesh to advance our shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, to supporting human rights and civil society in Bangladesh, and to deepening our people-to-people and economic ties."

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 25-2-2024

Afreen meets Fakhrul, Khasru

US to work with Bangladesh on shared vision

Afreen Akhter, US Department of State deputy assistant secretary for South and Central Asia, and Peter Haas, US ambassador to Bangladesh, exchange pleasantries with BNP Secretary General Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and BNP Standing Committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury yesterday. The US delegation, which is on a three-day visit to Dhaka, held a meeting with BNP leaders on the current political landscape in the country.

Diplomatic Correspondent

The US delegation arrived in Dhaka on a three-day visit yesterday and held a meeting with BNP leaders on the current political landscape in the country.

They also spoke about the opposition members who are in prison.

Afreen Akhter, US Department of State deputy assistant secretary for South and Central Asia, and Peter Haas, US ambassador to Bangladesh, were present, among others, at the meeting with BNP Secretary General Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and BNP Standing Committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury.

Other members of the US delegation include Eileen Laubacher, special assistant to US President Joe Biden and also National Security Council's senior director for South Asia, and Michael Schiffer, assistant administrator for Asia at the USAID.

"Engaging in constructive dialogue is key to understanding different perspectives and finding common ground," US embassy wrote in X, formerly Twitter, with a photo.

"We welcomed a fruitful discussion with @bdbnp78's Secretary General about the current political landscape in Bangladesh and the thousands of opposition members in prison. Looking forward to continued engagement," it said.

Meanwhile, apart from meeting the BNP leaders, Akhter also held a meeting with the labour rights activists and trade union leaders in Dhaka.

Schiffer joined USAID Mission Director in Bangladesh Reed Aeschliman and Shikho CEO Shahir Chowdhury to sign a memorandum of understanding to collaborate

in building the job skills of Bangladeshi youth and unlocking employment opportunities.

Today, the delegation is scheduled to hold separate meetings with Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen, Prime Minister's Private Industry and Investment Adviser Salman F Rahman and other officials of the ministries of foreign affairs, home, law and labour.

Eileen Laubacher is likely to focus on the Myanmar crisis, its implications on Bangladesh, the Rohingya issue, defence relations and the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS).

In a statement, the US embassy yesterday said the US delegation during its visit will discuss ways to strengthen diplomatic ties, address challenges, and promote a shared vision for the advancement of mutual interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

"The United States remains committed to partnering with Bangladesh to advance our shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, to supporting human rights, addressing climate change, advancing regional resilience to transnational threats, and promoting economic reforms," the statement said.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 25-2-2024

Sri Lanka reaffirms commitment to

India's security

Following reports of a Chinese research vessel docking in Maldives waters, Sri Lanka has reaffirmed its commitment to prevent its territory from being used by any third country to undermine India's security concerns.

During the ongoing 9th edition of the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Tharaka Balasuriya, assured that India's security concerns need not be a source of worry.

He acknowledged India's increasing influence and pledged to prevent any third party or nation from undermining India's security. Balasuriya expressed confidence that through open and sincere discussions, any challenges could be resolved effectively.

Until October 2023, Sri Lanka permitted China to dock its research ships in its waters, prompting concerns from India regarding potential surveillance activities in the region. However, earlier this year, Sri Lanka suspended the entry of such research vessels for one year, indicating enhanced cooperation following significant financial and material assistance from New Delhi.

In response to inquiries regarding China's influence in Sri Lanka, Balasuriya underscored the nation's special relationship with India, which is grounded in shared civilization and cultural bonds. He emphasized the significance of trade with multiple countries, including China, while affirming Sri Lanka's prioritization of its relationship with India.

Balasuriya offered reassurance to New Delhi regarding security concerns, affirming, "We are open for business with any country, but our relationship with India holds

special significance.” He stated that India need not be concerned about Sri Lanka’s relations with China, as the nation maintains positive ties with Western countries, the US, Russia, and the Middle East.

In efforts to revive the tourism sector, Balasuriya extended an invitation to Indian tourists, highlighting Sri Lanka’s diverse attractions. Recently, Sri Lanka announced free tourist visas until March for visitors from seven countries, including India, to boost tourism. Balasuriya expressed gratitude for India’s assistance during the 2022 economic crisis, commending the strong bilateral relationship, particularly India’s support with a US\$ 4.5 billion loan during tough times. He thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman for their support and highlighted India’s active involvement in International Monetary Fund (IMF) negotiations, reflecting the effectiveness of India’s “Neighbourhood First” policy. (Myind)

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 18-2-2024

India-Sri Lanka talks on Personnel Administration and Governance conclude

Both sides to work to formulate an MoU

Bilateral delegation-level talks took place in New Delhi last week between Secretary, Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DAR&PG), Shri V. Srinivas and Secretary to the Prime Minister, Anura Dissanayake for collaboration in Personnel Administration and Governance.

The Sri Lankan delegation included Secretary, Ministry of Technology, Dr. Dharmasri Kumaratunga, Secretary, Ministry of Public Administration, Home Affairs, Provincial Councils and Local Government, Pradeep Yasaratna, , Director General, Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (SLIDA), Nalaka Kaluwewe, Senior officials of DARPG, Shri NBS Rajput, Shri Puneet Yadav and Smt. Jaya Dubey participated in the discussions.

Both sides discussed the modalities of a proposed Memorandum of Understanding between the Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (SLIDA) and NCGG to conduct Capacity Building Programmes (CBP) for senior and mid-level civil servants of Sri Lanka by NCGG.

The Director of the Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (SLIDA), presented the Capacity Building Plan for the Island Service Officers of Sri Lanka over the next five years and collaboration in developing the training curriculum and conduct training for 1,000 officials at various seniority levels in hybrid mode.

The Indian side presented their key capabilities in Administrative Reforms and Recognising Meritocracy under the Prime Minister’s Awards Scheme for Public

Administration; handling Public Grievances through effective Redressal of Public Grievances by use of AI/ML in CPGRAMS, and Improving Service Delivery through promotion of e-Governance by initiatives Unified Service Portals, mandatory e-Services and strengthening e-Office and its Analytics.

The contours of the collaboration will be structured in an MoU to be developed by both sides.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 22-2-2024

President, Iranian FM discuss Persian Gulf’s crucial role in IO security

Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian engaged in discussions with President Ranil Wickremesinghe during an official visit to Sri Lanka.

The meeting, held at the Presidential Secretariat on Tuesday (20), centered on key issues including the ongoing violence in Gaza and opportunities for enhancing bilateral cooperation.

President Wickremesinghe reiterated the Sri Lankan Government’s firm stance on the Gaza conflict, emphasizing the immediate necessity for cessation of violence and the urgent need for a peace settlement. He underscored the principle that any peace agreement must be inclusive and not based solely on the demands of either side. Additionally, the President proposed the establishment of a Palestinian State within a timeframe of five years, ensuring the security of both Palestine and Israel.

Highlighting Sri Lanka’s strategic position in the Indian Ocean (IOR), President Wickremesinghe emphasized the nation’s commitment to ensuring freedom of navigation, particularly in the Persian Gulf. He stressed the vital role of the Persian Gulf in the broader context of Indian Ocean security.

In response, Minister Amir-Abdollahian expressed Iran’s dedication to fostering tourism to Sri Lanka and strengthening cultural ties between the two nations. He further conveyed Iran’s eagerness to explore avenues for expanded economic cooperation with Sri Lanka.

Accompanying President Wickremesinghe were President’s Secretary Saman Ekanayake and International Affairs Director Dinouk Colombage, reflecting the importance and seriousness of the discussions held during the meeting.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 18-2-2024

Changing dynamics of Japan-Sri Lanka relations

Varuna Shankar

Since 2023, Japan has extended its investment in South Asian infrastructure and connectivity projects to strengthen its soft power diplomacy in the region. As part of this extension, Sri Lanka hosted the Japanese Foreign Minister in July 2023 and invited Tokyo to resume its investment in Sri Lanka’s infrastructure

projects and its green and digital economies, after some of them were halted due to Chinese investments in similar projects.

The meeting also had a specific focus on funding power projects, roads, and ports. This comes after the cancellation of the previous MOU on port development with Japanese assistance.

Sri Lanka has experienced its worst financial crisis in more than seven decades. The previous Gotabaya Rajapaksa Government's dependence on Chinese financial assistance contributed to Sri Lanka's default. However, Sri Lanka is now fostering alternative alliances with dependable Asian partners through smaller forums to counter Chinese dominance, and Japan is a major player in this strategy.

Cooperation

While the relationship is based on cooperation as opposed to dependence, Japanese infrastructure funding is still a vital part of Sri Lanka's strategy to restructure its debt repayment plan and unlock the US\$ 2.9 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Therefore, a closer look at developments in the Sri Lanka-Japan relationship is essential to understanding future trajectories in the Sri Lankan economic crisis.

Sri Lanka's post-pandemic economic freefall resulted in a political and humanitarian crisis largely attributable to mismanagement by successive Sri Lankan Governments. For years the country has been plagued by the "twin deficit," or deficits in both State fiscal and current accounts. This twin deficit is accompanied by high inflation, high levels of foreign debt, endemic corruption, and Covid-19 stagnation, which also ravaged the island's vital tourism industry.

The geopolitical fall-out of the Russia-Ukraine War has exacerbated the food and energy crises. The previous Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration's economic plans, such as banning chemical fertiliser, also devastated the Ceylon Tea industry, adding to the economic pains.

Among the projects that the Sri Lankan Government has mismanaged over the years is the Jaya Container Terminal (JCT) project. The container terminal in Colombo is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA), and was initially funded by Japan in the 1980s. On May 28, 2019, India and Japan agreed to invest between US\$ 500-700 million to jointly develop the East Container Terminal (ECT). However, Sri Lanka halted this agreement to develop and operate the crucial terminal, stating that the ECT would be wholly owned and developed by the State-run SLPA.

The Government explained that it had offered foreign participation in the West Container Terminal (WCT) primarily because it required a large investment. The ECT, on the other hand, was constructed and required little additional financing. After the US\$ 500 million Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was cancelled and the Japanese-funded Malabe-Colombo Light Rail

Transit (LRT) project was suspended, there was a freeze in ties between Tokyo and Colombo.

While a key reason was the mistreatment of minorities by the Gotabaya Rajapaksa Government and Colombo Port workers protesting Indian control over Port operations, Japan was caught in the crossfire of domestic politics and the India-Sri Lanka bilateral relationship.

Recently, with the change of Government, the Japan-Sri Lanka relationship has been improving as Sri Lanka announced the co-development of the WCT with Japan and India. Unlike previous projects, this one will be operated as a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) company. The SLPA and companies selected by the Japanese and Indian Governments will be the major players.

Lead

China, as of June 2022, held 52 percent of Sri Lanka's bilateral debt. Japan was the second largest creditor, at 20 percent, followed by India at 12 percent and France at three percent. Japan had offered to take the lead in establishing a meeting of creditor nations to promote the restructuring of Sri Lanka's foreign debt, with India and France launching a common platform to aid Japan in this endeavour. The high-level meeting took place on the sidelines of the annual spring meetings of the World Bank and the IMF in Washington on April 13, 2023. Other international organisations, along with the private sector, also participated.

Japan's Ambassador to India, Hiroshi Suzuki, said that Japan was keen to work with India on projects in South Asia, and sees both India and Sri Lanka "as indispensable partners" to realise Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's vision of a "Free and Open Indo Pacific," which he unveiled in a speech in New Delhi in 2023.

Japan and India have also taken the lead in setting up humanitarian and rebuilding efforts in Sri Lanka. India has been a primary source of assistance, providing about US\$ 4 billion in currency swaps, loans, and humanitarian assistance. However, Japan has also provided Sri Lanka with emergency grant aid worth USD US\$ 3 billion.

As per official data, about 60 enterprises with US\$ 350 million in Japanese investments are operating in Sri Lanka. However, due to the current political instability and economic crisis, several projects have been halted including suspension of loans by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), putting on hold US\$ 464 million for the construction of a new multilevel terminal and viaduct at the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) which was to be completed by 2023.

Apart from Japanese investments, Tokyo has become an important partner in the maritime security of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Between 2011 and 2015, vessels of the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force visited Sri Lankan ports on 22 occasions. Sri Lanka is supported under three priority areas of promoting quality growth,

development cooperation for inclusive growth, and mitigating vulnerability, amounting to approximately US\$ 97 billion (March 31, 2020).

Japan has also provided approximately US\$ 36.5 million for major grant assistance in 2022. In May of the same year, the Government of Japan announced a US\$ 1.5 million (LKR 600 million) funding to help the Government of Sri Lanka respond to the ongoing economic crisis, indicating increased funding from Japan both as grants and investments.

Developing connectivity infrastructure in Sri Lanka requires large investments, which necessitates foreign participation. A credible structural reform program, along with macroeconomic adjustments, is critical to correct overall fiscal imbalances. In these economic conditions, the financial performance of Japanese and Indian businesses that have direct operations in Sri Lanka will be impacted amid a huge devaluation of the local currency. Since international investments in Sri Lanka are limited at the moment, the performance of these companies will be used as an indicator of investment potential by other investors and bleak conditions could diminish confidence in the Sri Lankan economy. The rise in mini-lateralism offers an opportunity for Colombo to gather Asian donors and investors to facilitate better consensus building and effective decision making.

Old partners

The revival of projects between Japan and Sri Lanka during the current Ranil Wickremesinghe Government marks an improvement in bilateral relations. The Government's near bankruptcy coupled with the worst economic crisis in the post-Independence era challenged Sri Lanka's bilateral relations with old partners like Japan. Although Japan has long been considered a key Sri Lankan partner, aid from Tokyo has remained in the low millions, which is not enough to counter the Chinese presence in the island nation.

Japan could increase its investment in Sri Lanka through projects such as critical infrastructure, power projects, port and road development, dedicated investment zones and green and digital technologies. Japan provides an opportunity for Sri Lanka to reduce its dependence on China for economic reform, while Sri Lanka provides Japan an opening to penetrate deeper into the South Asian market.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 26-2-2024

Bangladesh bargains for cheaper power

Power sale agreement with Nepal Electricity Authority likely to be delayed as Dhaka wants more negotiation.

Prithvi Man Shrestha

KATHMANDU, Nepal's hopes of promptly signing a power sale deal with Bangladesh have been dashed with the Bangladeshi side seeking negotiation to reduce the prices quoted by the Nepal Electricity Authority.

Once the two sides agree on tariffs, it will pave the way for the first-ever trading of power between the two countries. Officials at the Electricity Authority (NEA) and the energy ministry said that the Bangladeshi side wanted to cut the price quoted by the Nepali utility through negotiation.

"After Nepal stood its ground that the price it quoted was reasonable, they first wanted to discuss the matter with higher authorities," said an NEA official.

A team led by NEA executive director Kul Man Ghising was in Bangladesh last week. The authority is yet to formally disclose the tariff that Nepal had proposed.

However, according to a source at the NEA, it is close to 7 cents [around NRs 9.30] per unit.

"I am not part of the delegation, but I heard that the Bangladeshi side wanted to negotiate the rate as low as 5 cents per unit," said an official of the energy ministry on condition of anonymity.

Earlier, NEA Deputy Managing Director Pradeep Kumar Thike, who also looks into power trade, told the Post that the price quoted by Nepal was in the range of what an Indian company was charged for a medium-term power purchase agreement.

In May last year, the NEA and the NTPC Vidyut Vyapar Nigam (NVVN) Limited-India signed a five-year power purchase agreement.

Based on the agreement, the NEA would get a net tariff of IRs5.25 (Rs8.40) per unit from India after trade margin, transmission losses and wheeling charges. The NEA would not bear the cost of transmission and trade margin (service charge) for the supply of power to India, according to the NEA.

After the Bangladeshi side sought approval from their higher authority following the disagreement over the rate, the Nepali delegation returned home late last week. However, NEA officials are optimistic that the two sides will agree on the tariff when they sit down for the next meeting. "They are ready to buy and we are ready to sell," said Thike. "The talks have also been positive and we are optimistic that we will arrive at a final agreement at the next meeting."

Thike said that another meeting was yet to be scheduled. According to a statement issued on February 22, the two sides agreed to conclude a power sale agreement as early as possible to export Nepal's electricity from the upcoming rainy season.

The NEA had sent a proposal to export 40MW power from June 15 to November 15. According to the NEA, the power sale agreement will be valid for five years.

The power will be transmitted through the Nepal-India Dhalkebar-Muzaffarpur Cross Border Transmission Line and the India-Bangladesh Barampur-Bheramara Cross Border Transmission Line.

India has also already agreed in principle to facilitate the export of 40MW power from Nepal to Bangladesh. When Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal visited India in May-June last year, the southern neighbour had

promised to help with the export of this quantum of power to Bangladesh through its existing transmission infrastructure.

With Indian territory falling between Nepal and Bangladesh, both sides must take India on board in the energy trade.

Once the two sides agree on a tariff to be charged, Nepal, Bangladesh and India are expected to sign a tripartite deal under which Nepal will export power to Bangladesh for the first time.

Nepal and Bangladesh in May last year had agreed to sign a tripartite agreement between the NEA, the Bangladesh Power Development Board and the NVVN during the meeting of the energy secretary-level joint steering committee.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 22-2-2024

INTERVIEW

‘We believe Nepalis may want to go to Britain to enhance their skills and come back’

UK Minister for Development and Africa Andrew Mitchell visited Nepal on February 19-20. He met top government officials in Kathmandu including the prime minister, the finance minister, and the foreign minister. He also signed a new development portfolio of £400 million (\$505m) for Nepal. In this context, the Post’s Anil Giri sat with Mitchell to discuss his Nepal visit. The world itself is in turmoil. Several conflicts are happening. What brings you to Nepal at this critical juncture?

As the British development minister, I am in Nepal to announce two new programmes, but more importantly, to launch the next phase of our development programme. This entails spending approximately \$500 million before the end of the decade to further our bilateral work with Nepal.

We are also strong supporters of the investment conference, which is coming up on April 28 and 29. We believe that now is a critical moment where Nepal could attract significant private sector investment. The British Development Finance Institution, which is already investing substantially in Nepal, is taking a great interest in further investments. In my opinion, the double taxation treaty, which is expected to be presented to the Cabinet soon, is one of the main economic improvements that the government plans to implement.

How can the UK help Nepal build the capacity to seek climate funding and climate justice?

We also put money into the loss and damage fund. But we are very clear that for the loss and damage fund to work, they will need to find a much wider set of donors. That is why we’re very keen that people should look at new mechanisms for financing that involve countries like Russia and China, as well as others, too. There are various suggestions, one of which is that maritime fuel

could have a levy imposed upon it, which would raise a great deal of additional money. But Britain believes that you need a

different set of donors and a different source of finance if loss and damage are to work. Otherwise, you’re merely reorienting existing streams of funding.

What prompted the UK government to announce this aid to Nepal? What is the connection—Gurkhas?

That’s a different matter. We’re continuing to talk on the issue of pensions, and I’m absolutely delighted that in the last few weeks, the latest group of 337 Gurkhas has left for training in Catterick, Britain. It has nothing to do with that; it is a reflection of the closeness of our relationship. Britain has had a bit of a dip in terms of its work internationally and development.

Over recent years, a white paper issued by the UK government is a very clear symbol that Britain is back and is trying to exercise a leadership position on driving forward, the attack on the egregious extent of poverty, which disfigures our world to work very closely with our partners on development, of which Nepal has always been a great partner.

What is the anticipation of a result by 2030?

I think the portfolio addresses some specific green and climate issues. I saw yesterday the work that we are doing together on irrigation, stopping gender-based violence, and a very broad set of aims that we all want to see achieved, placing girls and women at the centre of everything we do in development. So on a whole range of things where we work together, we want to drive them forward. If you asked me what we want to see by 2030, we want to see the role of the private sector in Nepal’s economy—greater than it is at the moment because we think there’s scope for that, given the end of conflict and the fact that BII is here as an investor. So we see a big role in terms of employment, investment, jobs, and the alleviation of poverty.

Will the new portfolio that you announced go through your own channel or the government’s system?

Yesterday I saw the work that we are doing through a hospital [in Butwal] on tackling gender-based violence. It’s to focus on how we get more girls into school, how we enable more farmers to resist the change in weather, and how we grow two crops a year. It’s about winning results and using our taxpayers’ money to work in partnership with Nepal to deliver those results. For example, the hospital is working very closely with the government on the whole. We don’t do direct budget support, which is putting money into the country’s budget. But there are examples where we work out what is the best way to achieve these results, and on gender-based violence, someone will work incredibly closely with the government and the hospital authorities to deliver those results.

How do you ensure that each pound that comes to Nepal through UK Aid is spent in a transparent manner?

We have zero tolerance for corruption. No programme suffers, fortunately, because we have very good checks and balances. On rare occasions, when our programme is the subject of corruption allegations, we stop it and seek absolute accountability and transparency. And we believe that sunlight is the best disinfectant. We value transparency and focus on things, and we have checks and balances that ensure that our money is well used. Also, if we're not happy with the routes by which we are seeking to win those results and spend this money on delivering corruption-free services, then we don't use it.

Nepali Gurkhas who served in the British Army before 1997 are crying for equal pay and pensions, similar to those recruited after 1997. Why do these rules not apply equally?

There are three different groups. Gurkhas, I think, are affected by these issues. The first is the groups that the Gurkha welfare trust looks after, particularly the very elderly, to ensure that those here in Nepal have dignity in their old age. And they're getting very, very old nurses, with a diminishing number. The Gurkha Welfare Trust looks after that.

The second group are those who received the terms and conditions; they've gone to the UK; they get a standard UK pension because that is the arrangement, terms and conditions that they are. The third group are those who retired here on an agreed pension, a big pension in Nepal, who may now go to the UK, and who, of course, are eligible for UK benefits. That is the third group, \the particular group that you're referring to. On all of those, I think we should keep talking. We have a tremendous debt to the Gurkhas, which we recognise; these are different categories. And they require different treatment, but we should just keep talking about this. We haven't reached a definitive conclusion.

The Nepal government is talking about completing the transitional justice process. Was there any indication that this process will now move smoothly?

We didn't talk about that, but I did say that I thought the poor deserve great credit for having addressed the conflict. And I think the government of Nepal deserves great credit for having reached that very happy stage.

So you have to read the white paper. The white paper is 140 pages. It's one of the most exciting things I've read in the last year. Two things about development matter. One is that it is long-term. The other is that it is a partnership. It's one of our joint priorities. It's about working together, partnership, and localism to deliver joint objectives. And we have an extremely brilliant Head of Development here, who's steeped in this world and knows it inside out. And she makes sure that what we pursue is a joint endeavour. If you're setting priorities, we discuss and agree on the areas that will work together.

There was an agreement to send Nepali nurses to the United Kingdom. How does this help build the capacity of the Nepali state?

When I was not a minister, I introduced a bill into the British House of Commons to say that whenever a nurse or a clinician comes from a developing country to the UK, the UK's development programme should pay for nurses to be trained in that country. And it was an idea that was floated as a bill. We believe that people here may want to go to Britain to enhance their skills and come back. A lot of people who come to our country to work in our health service build up their skills and come back and use their skills here. Through the development programme, we are building capacity, including in the health areas I saw during my hospital visit. It was a tremendous government agreement; we don't recruit except through this government agreement. There are, I hope, benefits both ways.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 26-2-2024

India fully stops Ravi water flow to Pakistan: report

Jammu and Kashmir region will now benefit from the 1150 cusecs of water that was previously allocated to Pakistan

By News Desk

NEW DELHI: The flow of water from Ravi river to Pakistan has been completely halted with the completion of the Shahpur Kandi barrage, as per media reports cited by Times of India.

Shahpur Kandi barrage is situated on the border of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir.

According to the report, the Jammu and Kashmir region will now benefit from the 1150 cusecs of water that was previously allocated to Pakistan. The water will be used for irrigation purposes for over 32,000 hectares of land in the Kathua and Samba districts.

The Shahpur Kandi barrage project, which is crucial for irrigation and hydropower generation, has faced numerous challenges over the past three decades. However, it is now nearing completion. The reports claim that the Indus Water Treaty signed between India and Pakistan in 1960, India has exclusive rights over the waters of the Ravi, Sutlej, and Beas rivers, while Pakistan has control over the Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab rivers. The completion of the Shahpur Kandi barrage allows India to make maximum use of the Ravi river, ensuring that the water previously flowing towards Pakistan from the old Lakanpur dam will now be utilized in Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab, the reports added.

India has already constructed several storage works, including the Bhakra Dam on the Sutlej, Pong and Pandoh Dam on the Beas, and Thein (Ranjitsagar) on the Ravi. These projects, along with others like the Beas-Sutlej link and the Indira Gandhi Nahar Project,

have allowed India to utilize nearly its entire share (95%) of the waters from the eastern rivers.

However, the media reports say, approximately two million acre-feet of water from the Ravi river is still flowing unutilized to Pakistan below Madhopur. With the completion of the Shahpur Kandi barrage, India can now harness the water resources from the Ravi river for its own benefit, the reports added.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 22-2-2024

‘Understanding and collaborative efforts must for stable Pak-Afghan relations’

By Staff Correspondent

Islamabad: Pakistan-Afghanistan Religious Scholars Conference has developed a consensus on the need for sustained efforts to address humanitarian crises, promote dialogue, and build trust between two sides. The conference was organised here by Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) in collaboration with its Afghan partner Organisation for Economic Studies and Peace (OESP), as part of their initiative Beyond Boundaries. Dr Qibla Ayaz, Chairperson, Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), emphasised the importance of religious diplomacy and the role of scholars in addressing bilateral issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Based on his experiences of participation in various delegations and dialogues aimed at promoting girls' education, both domestically and in Afghanistan, he stressed the need to engage with key stakeholders, including religious leaders who possess the influence and understanding to contribute meaningfully to resolving bilateral issues. Maulana Muhammad Tayyab Qureshi, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Chief Khateeb, noted that the way forward for the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan lies in both sides proactively addressing mutual concerns and taking conscious efforts to promote cordial ties between them at different levels of the relationship, including people-to-people contacts, economy and politics. He stressed the importance of addressing the insecurity and humanitarian crises plaguing the region, particularly the desire among the young members of the population to leave due to economic hardships. Additionally, he advocated for empowering women and promoting education, citing examples of Muslim-majority countries where progress was achieved through a balance of religious and formal education. Abdul Hakim Mujahid, former Afghan Diplomat, shed light on Afghanistan's dire humanitarian situation, calling for the lifting of sanctions to tackle the crisis and economic challenges effectively. He suggested integrating the Afghan Taliban into the global fabric to effectively combat terrorism and ensure stability. Maulana Hamid-ul-Haq Haqqani, Vice Chancellor, Dar-ul-Uloom Haqqani, Akora Khattak, advocated inclusive policies that promote education and empower women, recognising crucial role of education in fostering

socioeconomic stability and peace. Mufti Jamaluddin, former JUI MNA emphasised that the cultural and religious similarities between Pakistan and Afghanistan can bind the two nations into a relationship characterised by cooperation, trust, and understanding.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 28-2-2024

Strengthening cooperation with China the national consensus in Pakistan: ambassador

Solid future guaranteed

By Xie Wenting and Chu Daye

China and Pakistan share a strong and enduring friendship that dates back to the 1950s, and the China-Pakistan relationship is a shining example of strong bilateral ties based on mutual respect and shared interests. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is also a flagship project under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that aims to enhance connectivity and trade between the two countries. How will the CPEC develop in the next decade? How does Pakistan envision the development of ties with China? Global Times reporters Xie Wenting and Chu Daye (GT) spoke with Pakistani Ambassador to China Khalil-ur-Rahman Hashmi (Hashmi) on these and other crucial matters.

GT: As the new Pakistani Ambassador to China, what are your priorities? What has impressed you most about China so far?

Hashmi: The topmost priority for me is threefold: a) to further deepen the all-weather strategic cooperative partnership between our two countries; b) to solidify the bonds of friendship between our two peoples; and c) to implement the consensus reached between the leadership of our two countries.

This is my second tenure in China, and I've been thoroughly impressed by the progress made by China in the last 15 years. The first thing that struck me when I landed in Beijing in November last year was the massive improvement in air quality. However, air quality is just one aspect of the very well-rounded development in diverse sectors including human, social, technological, and economic development. All these facets have witnessed steady and positive development. That's what has impressed me the most.

GT: In what new areas do you hope China and Pakistan can further enhance cooperation?

Hashmi: I believe cooperation between Pakistan and China is already very multi-dimensional, covering almost every area. For example, we have just completed 10 years of intense and multidimensional cooperation under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is the pioneering project of President Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The first phase of CPEC was primarily focused on two things: infrastructure (including transport infrastructure) and energy. Both these areas are key ingredients for any

economy to grow rapidly. The first decade of CPEC has laid important ground for fast-tracking development. Moving forward, it will be important to prioritize industrial cooperation and industrialization, including through promoting special economic zones and attracting and facilitating new investments. We welcome Chinese enterprises and businesses to invest in diverse sectors such as agriculture, mining, information technology, textiles, engineering, and electric vehicles.

GT: Will changes in the Pakistani government impact bilateral relations between China and Pakistan?

Hashmi: Over the 73 years, Pakistan-China relationship has become very solid and assumed unique characteristics in terms of inter-state relations. Ours is a relationship that is not affected by internal developments in either country or regional and international events. That is why we refer to it as an ironclad relationship that has stood the test of time. In Pakistan, there is a national consensus across political parties and various segments of society on further strengthening our bilateral ties with China.

With the recent elections, a new government is being formed, and I am confident that it will play its role in further bolstering our strategic cooperative partnership with China.

GT: Could you elaborate on Pakistan's plan for the next decade of development within the CPEC?

Hashmi: I would use three terms for next phase of CPEC: connectivity; infrastructure, and industrialization; and agriculture.

Connectivity is a multidimensional concept including but not limited to physical, digital, and people-to-people connectivity. One tangible outcome in terms of physical connectivity is the optimization of the Mainline-1 railway project.

As for industrialization, we are looking at the prioritization of certain sectors. Currently, there already is the prioritization of four special economic zones. I personally visited one of these zones in Pakistan (Rashakai Special Economic Zone in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province) recently. We are taking steps to speed up operations so that more companies can come and invest. We are also establishing a free trade zone at Gwadar.

Agriculture is another area receiving a lot of focus these days. We would be looking at collaborating on projects related to seed technology, drip irrigation techniques and induction of modern agricultural machinery.

GT: Could you provide us with some details regarding the progress of the Mainline-1 project?

Hashmi: We are making steady progress. China Railway Administration completed a technical study in late of the Mainline-1 project. They have assessed the project to be commercially feasible. The project can sustain itself and will pay off in the long term.

Our two sides are now looking at the next steps, including formal approval within our own system, following procedures, and then finalizing the financing agreement.

GT: What is your opinion on the efforts made by certain Western media outlets to portray CPEC as a so-called "debt trap" for Pakistan?

Hashmi: For me, I see it as no more than propaganda or political opinion, and not facts.

It is important to see things in perspective. The industrial development - infrastructure, energy, road infrastructure, and port infrastructure development - entails huge investments. Developing countries find it extremely difficult to mobilize financing for such projects. It has always been the case that developing countries seek different means of financing. What has happened is that over a period of time, these big projects were done through the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and similar organizations.

Unfortunately, the funding available within these organizations has decreased and the gap has been filled by China. So, instead of criticizing China, China should, in fact, be appreciated because it has made that financing available again to so many countries in the developing world.

As I mentioned, infrastructure and energy are key ingredients that lay the foundation for sustainable economic growth, jobs, and livelihoods. Countries rely on grants, investments, and concessional loans for these projects. Concessional loans have low interest rates by definition. After investing in infrastructure and energy, the economy begins to grow. Industrialization cannot succeed without sufficient energy and transport infrastructure. As economic activity increases, more businesses and investors come in, generating more revenue. This revenue not only pays off the loans but also sets the stage for rapid economic growth.

GT: Given the security challenges in the region, including the spillover effect of terrorism in Afghanistan, how does Pakistan cooperate with China on security issues to ensure regional stability?

Hashmi: We have had very close cooperation and coordination consultation with China for many years on several levels. When it comes to security issues in the region, especially with respect to Afghanistan, we have a trilateral mechanism involving Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China.

Pakistan and China also have special representatives on Afghanistan. There is a lot of consultation and coordination underway, as well as goodwill to help Afghanistan be economically viable. There is a willingness to help Afghanistan overcome its challenges in security and the economy among others. It is clear that without addressing the security challenges, which are exacerbated by groups like ISKP and TTP, it is very difficult to make the economy work, promote economic

growth, create jobs, stimulate economic activity, or develop infrastructure.

The amount of money and effort spent on building infrastructure can be destroyed by these groups, as has been the case in the past. It is therefore important that relevant authorities in Afghanistan pay attention to the concerns that have been expressed by neighboring countries on security issues, because it is a common concern for their neighboring countries. **GT: What specific measures will Pakistan take to protect Chinese personnel and enterprises operating in Pakistan?** Hashmi: The safety and security of Chinese persons in Pakistan continues to remain a priority for Government of Pakistan. We have established a dedicated division of security forces for protection of Chinese personnel, enterprises, and projects related to the CPEC. Of course, we are aware that there are detractors, countries and entities that seek to disrupt or damage Pakistan-China relations or economic cooperation. We have seen many examples before. It is a multi-dimensional issue where there are actors and entities both inside and outside of the country that we need to pay attention to, closely monitor their nefarious activities, and defeat them. **GT: We noticed the recent reports regarding the evidence of India's support of terrorist forces in Pakistan. What's your take on this?**

Hashmi: We have shared concrete information and evidence about Indian involvement in previous years. I am referring to India's state apparatus, state agencies, and state operatives who have been involved in sabotage and terrorist activities directly targeting the CPEC and Chinese personnel in Pakistan. Much of this information and evidence has been shared with United Nations and many western countries over the years.

India's nefarious designs are exemplified by the case of a serving Indian Navy commander who was arrested by Pakistan in 2016, who confessed to planning, organizing, financing, and carrying out terrorist activities inside Pakistan at the behest of Indian authorities. This is just one example. There are other cases that substantiate Pakistan's consistent position about Indian involvement in acts of subversion and terrorism on Pakistani soil. India has on record publicly opposed the CPEC; which is pioneering project of BRI, and a symbol of strong Pakistan-China partnership for sustainable development and shared prosperity. The Indians have an axe to grind here, but there is substantial evidence of their involvement in criminal and terrorist activities inside Pakistan. **GT: What steps are being taken to strengthen people-to-people ties between China and Pakistan?** Hashmi: People-to-people exchanges are a priority area of outreach between our two countries. For example, in 2023, my predecessor and the Embassy organized for the visit of a group of 15 Chinese tour operators to Pakistan. The idea was for them to identify potential packages for Chinese

tourists to visit those places. There are different types of packages available, such as adventure tourism in the high mountains, cultural and heritage sites, and other attractions that may interest Chinese tourists. In 2023, 12 group tour operators from Pakistan also visited China for the first time and explored joint plans with their Chinese counterparts. Also in 2023, the Embassy organized a Gandhara exhibition at the Palace Museum. This exhibition showcased the ancient connection between Pakistan and China, highlighting the people who used to travel between both countries. This exhibition also emphasized the Buddhist connection between the two nations. Many artifacts from that area were brought and displayed at the exhibition. The exhibition has since traveled to Gansu and is currently in Shenzhen, where it will conclude in March this year. These are just two examples of our efforts. Moving forward, we plan to organize and focus more on engaging the youth in various forms. We are also planning a fashion show and Pakistan cuisine or Pakistani food week this year. We want to showcase that spicy food is not just popular in Sichuan, but also in many parts of Pakistan. We would like to work more on showcasing similarities between the Yangtze River and the Indus River civilizations in our part of the world, as the two biggest rivers in our two countries. We know that rivers play a major role in the development of civilization.

We are exploring the possibility of hosting exhibitions on various CPEC-related products. So all in all there are a lot of activities planned for this year and beyond to deepen cultural and people-to-people ties.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 22-2-2024

China and India militaries to 'turn the page'

By Jiang Chenglong

The Chinese and Indian militaries have agreed to maintain communication on current border issues to "turn the page" over the border situation, China's Ministry of National Defense said on Wednesday.

In a brief statement, the ministry announced that the 21st round of the China-India Corps Commander Level Meeting was held at the Moldo-Chushul border meeting point on the Chinese side on Monday.

The two sides conducted positive, in-depth, and constructive communication on resolving border issues of mutual concern, the news release said.

It said that both sides agreed to continue communication through military and diplomatic channels, guided by the important consensus of the leaders of the two countries, to reach an acceptable solution for both sides as soon as possible and "turn the page" in the border situation.

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3.	Boost to INDIA, Samajwadi Party-Congress pact sealed - Tribune News Service	The Tribune, Chandigarh	22-2-2024	22
4.	LS polls: AAP, Congress announce seat-sharing pact for Delhi, Gujarat, Goa and Haryana; to go separately in Punjab - PTI	The Tribune, Chandigarh	25-2-2024	23
5.	BJP-led NDA will top 400-seat tally in Lok Sabha polls; next five years will see rapid development: PM Modi - PTI	The Telegraph, Kolkata	29-2-2024	24
6.	Most political parties want single-phase elections: CEC - Tribune News Service Electoral Bond Scheme Scrapped	The Tribune, Chandigarh	25-2-2024	24
7.	Unbonded: On the striking down of the Electoral Bond Scheme by the Supreme Court	The Hindu, Delhi	16-2-2024	25
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THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 28-2-2024

Rajya Sabha Elections: Full List of Winners in polls to 56 Upper

House seats

PTI

Rajya Sabha Election 2024 Winners List: The election process for 15 Rajya Sabha seats across three states concluded on Tuesday, with results declared in the evening. In a decisive turn of events, the Samajwadi Party faced a setback in one seat while the Congress failed to win the sole seat in Himachal Pradesh despite the party's majority in the state Assembly. A total of 56 candidates were in the fray of which 41 were elected unopposed.

In Karnataka, the Congress secured three out of four Rajya Sabha seats, while the BJP clinching one. However, the elections were marred by one cross-voting and an abstention, posing a setback for the saffron party in the southern state. Meanwhile, the saffron party secured eight out of ten seats in Uttar Pradesh. The Samajwadi Party faced a setback as one of its three candidates was defeated due to cross-voting where all eight candidates fielded by the BJP emerged victorious.

The lone Rajya Sabha seat in Himachal Pradesh became a focal point of controversy as the BJP claimed that the Congress government in the state had lost a majority. The claims set off a flurry of activity which also saw the party's internal dissent come to the fore.

Rajya Sabha Election Result 2024: Check full list of winner

G Babu Rao (YSR Congress) – Andhra Pradesh

YV Subba Reddy (YSR Congress) – Andhra Pradesh

M Raghunath Reddy (YSR Congress) – Andhra Pradesh

Sanjay Kumar Jha (JDU (U) – Bihar

Dharmshila Gupta (BJP) – Bihar

Bhim Singh (BJP) – Bihar

Manoj Kumar Jha (RJD) – Bihar

Sanjay Yadav (RJD) – Bihar

Akhilesh Prasad Singh (Congress) – Bihar

Devendra Pratap Singh (BJP) – Chhattisgarh

JP Nadda (BJP) – Gujarat

Jasvantsinh Parmar (BJP) – Gujarat

Mayank Nayak (BJP) – Gujarat

Govindbhai Dholakia (BJP) – Gujarat

Subhash Barala (BJP) – Haryana

Murugan (BJP) – Madhya Pradesh

Umesh Nath Maharaj (BJP) – Madhya Pradesh

Banshilal Gurjar (BJP) – Madhya Pradesh

Maya Naroliya (BJP) – Madhya Pradesh

Ashok Singh (Congress) – Madhya Pradesh

Ashok Chavan (BJP) – Maharashtra

Medha Kulkarni (BJP) – Maharashtra

Ajit Gopchade (BJP) – Maharashtra

Milind Deora (Shiv Sena) – Maharashtra

Praful Patel (NCP) – Maharashtra

Chandrakant Handore (Congress) – Maharashtra

Ashwini Vaishnaw (BJP) – Odisha

Debashish Samantray (BJD) – Odisha

Subhashish Khuntia (BJD) – Odisha

Sonia Gandhi (Congress) – Rajasthan

Chunnilal Garasiya (BJP) – Rajasthan

Madan Rathore (BJP) – Rajasthan

Renuka Chowdhury (Congress) – Telangana

Anil Kumar Yadav (Congress) -Telangana

V Ravichandran (BRS) – Telangana

Sushmita Dev (TMC) – West Bengal

Sagarika Ghose (TMC) – West Bengal

Mamata Thakur (TMC) – West Bengal

Md Nadimul Haque (TMC) – West Bengal

Samik Bhattacharya (BJP) – West Bengal

Mahendra Bhatt (BJP) – Uttarakhand

Jaya Bachchan (SP) – Uttar Pradesh

Ramji Lal Suman (SP) – Uttar Pradesh

RPN Singh (BJP) – Uttar Pradesh

MP Chaudhary Tejveer Singgh (BJP) – Uttar Pradesh

Amarpal Maurya (BJP) – Uttar Pradesh

Sangeeta Balwant (BJP) – Uttar Pradesh

Sudhanshu Trivedi (BJP) – Uttar Pradesh

Sadhna Singh (BJP) – Uttar Pradesh

Naveen Jain (BJP) – Uttar Pradesh

Sanjay Seth (BJP) – Uttar Pradesh

Harsh Mahajan (BJP) – Himachal Pradesh

Ajay Maken (Congress) – Karnataka

Nasser Hussain (Congress) – Karnataka

GC Chandrashekar (Congress) – Karnataka

Narayansa Bhandage (BJP) – Karnataka

Rajya Sabha election process

Every two years, the Rajya Sabha, India's Upper House, witnesses elections for one-third of its 245 seats. This intricate process involves indirect voting by elected members of state legislative assemblies and union territories. Elected members of state legislative assemblies and union territories serve as the eligible voters in these elections. Candidates are nominated by political parties based on their respective strengths in the state assemblies.

Single transferable vote (STV) system:

The elections follow the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system. This allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. If a candidate secures enough first-choice votes, they are elected. Surplus votes from winning candidates are then transferred to lower-ranked choices based on preferences, potentially electing other candidates until all seats are filled. This ensures a proportional representation of various parties.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 29-2-2024

**Express View on Rajya Sabha polls:
Opposition breaking and BJP winning**

The Rajya Sabha election show on Tuesday was riveting — and immensely sobering. Taking centre stage were cross-voting Congress and SP MLAs, listening to what they called their “antaratma ki awaz (inner voice)”, ending up in BJP victories beyond what its numbers foretold, and dramatic upsets for Congress and SP in Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh. And, in the immediate aftermath, a suspenseful battle of survival for the sole Congress government in the north complete with allegations that six of its MLAs were spirited away to a resort in BJP-ruled Haryana (they have subsequently returned). At election’s end, the BJP has pushed its way to within touching distance of a majority in the Upper House, while Congress looks even more disheveled, if that were possible, than it did before it. Going ahead, however, for both the losers and winner of Tuesday’s tawdry contest, there are uncomfortable questions and, as the Lok Sabha election draws closer, much to reflect on.

Congress had wrested Himachal Pradesh from the BJP in 2022 in an outright victory — it finished with 40 seats in a House of 68, with the BJP trailing well behind at 25. And yet, if Congress’s Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu government looks like it is teetering on the brink the day after a tie-breaker was needed for the lone RS seat in the state, a predatory BJP is primarily to blame — but Congress is also an accomplice in its own diminishing. By all accounts, the Congress high command turned a tin ear to the threats within — the chief ministership of Sukhu remained an unsettled matter and the party’s attempted balancing act between rival factions was not succeeding in stanching the internal bloodletting. Just as Congress took its eye off the ball in Himachal Pradesh, the SP appeared to have lost its connect with its own leaders in UP. There have been indications for some time now that while Akhilesh Yadav inherited the party from his father, he is a distant presence, displaying very little of Netaji’s mulayam (soft) touch and constant engagement with party colleagues.

For those who are restless or discontented in rival parties, the BJP’s air of winnability, real and projected,

is arguably a strong draw ahead of a crucial Lok Sabha election. And yet, that is surely not all there is to the phenomenon that seems to be picking up pace in state after state — of leaders and legislators from non-BJP parties crossing over to the BJP. Operation Lotus is no figment of the Opposition’s imagination. Apart from MLAs floor-crossing and cross-voting in the BJP’s favour, it folds in splits in rival parties, and the sudden demise of governments headed by non-BJP parties. It includes the BJP using fear and favour, carrot and stick, and the weaponisation of central agencies to selectively target those in Opposition parties. For now, its will to win at all costs may be delivering results. But as the party that rules at the Centre and in many states, and one that is likely to remain a dominant pole in the polity for the foreseeable future, the BJP must pause and reflect on the ramifications of its winner-takes-all approach even if it means playing fast and loose with the rules of the game. Smash-and-grab politics may yield an immediate dividend but it has a high cost.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 22-2-2024

**Boost to INDIA, Samajwadi Party-
Congress pact sealed**

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, In a major boost to the INDIA alliance, the Congress and Samajwadi Party on Wednesday finalised the seat-sharing arrangement in the politically significant state of Uttar Pradesh for the forthcoming General Election, with Akhilesh Yadav offering 17 seats, including Amethi, Raebareli and Varanasi, to the Congress.

The Samajwadi Party will contest the remaining 63 seats in the state. There are 80 Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh. The SP, which had earlier announced its candidate for Varanasi constituency (represented by PM Narendra Modi), has now withdrawn the name in favour of the Congress. Meanwhile, the Congress is likely to offer the SP one seat, possibly Khajuraho, out of the total 29 Lok Sabha seats in Madhya Pradesh.

The seat-sharing announcement was made at a press conference in Lucknow. Samajwadi Party general secretary Rajendra Chaudhary and his Congress counterpart Avinash Pandey, while addressing the press conference, said the alliance was a message for the country.

“There are 80 Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh. Akhileshji has said many times that the BJP had come to power at the Centre from here and it is because of Uttar Pradesh that it will lose power in 2024,” Chaudhary said, adding that “the situation in the country is very bad as farmers and youth are on the streets. The INDIA bloc’s dream is to save the country from the BJP”.

Pandey told reporters that the Congress had not yet decided on candidates for its seats, including the high-profile Amethi and Raebareli seats. "The Gandhi family considers both as their 'home' and will take a decision soon," he said amid speculations that Priyanka Gandhi Vadra may make her electoral debut from Raebareli as Sonia Gandhi has vacated the seat and shifted to the Rajya Sabha from Rajasthan.

Earlier in the day, Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav had indicated in Lucknow that all was well within the INDIA group. "All is well that ends well. Yes, there will be an alliance and there is no conflict. Everything will be clear soon," Akhilesh was quoted as saying.

His party had earlier said he would join Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra only if its seat-sharing proposal was accepted. It is believed that after the SP chief served the ultimatum on the Congress, Sonia Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra directly spoke to the SP chief, leading to the deal being finalised.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 25-2-2024

LS polls: AAP, Congress announce seat-sharing pact for Delhi, Gujarat, Goa and Haryana; to go separately in Punjab

AAP to contest 4 Lok Sabha seats in Delhi, Congress 3

PTI

New Delhi, The Aam Aadmi Party will contest four Lok Sabha seats in Delhi and the Congress three, the two constituents of the INDIA bloc said on Saturday as they announced their seat-sharing arrangements for the national capital, Gujarat, Goa and Haryana.

AAP General Secretary (organisation) Sandeep Pathak said his party entered into an alliance with the Congress by sidelining its own political interests as it believes that the "country is important and the party secondary".

The BJP termed the Congress-AAP tie-up as an alliance of the "corrupt", asserting that neither chemistry nor arithmetic favours the two parties against the NDA, the ruling combine led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Congress and the AAP are constituents of the INDIA bloc formed by opposition parties to take on the BJP in the upcoming general elections.

At a joint press conference here on Saturday, Congress leader Mukul Wasnik announced the AAP will contest the Lok Sabha seats of New Delhi, West Delhi, South Delhi and East Delhi while his party will fight in Chandni Chowk, northeast Delhi and the northwest Delhi seats.

He said the Congress workers in Delhi will ensure that INDIA bloc candidates win all seven seats in the national capital.

The BJP won all seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi in the 2014 and 2019 general elections. In the last Lok Sabha polls, BJP candidates in each of the seats polled more votes than Congress and AAP candidates combined.

Senior AAP leaders and ministers Saurabh Bhardwaj and Atishi, Delhi Congress president Arvinder Singh Lovely and AICC in-charge of Delhi Deepak Babaria were also present at the press conference.

According to the seat-sharing arrangement, the AAP will contest Bharuch and Bhavnagar seats in Gujarat while the Congress will field candidates on the remaining 24.

The Congress will contest both the Lok Sabha seats in Goa and the lone seat in Chandigarh, Wasnik said. The AAP had earlier declared its Benaulim MLA Venzy Viegas as its candidate for the South Goa Lok Sabha seat, currently held by Congress' Francisco Sardinha.

In Haryana, the Congress will contest nine of the 10 Lok Sabha seats while the AAP will field its candidate in Kurukshetra, Wasnik said.

He said that given the "special circumstances" that exist in Punjab, the AAP and the Congress have decided to fight the Lok Sabha polls separately in the state.

About Gujarat's Bharuch, where late Congress leader Ahmed Patel hailed from, Wasnik hoped that all Congress workers would respect the decision to give the seat to AAP.

"After taking into account all situations, we have decided this between the two parties. I have full confidence that each Congress worker will honour this decision and AAP workers will also follow this agreement," he said.

The decision, however, did not go down well with Faisal Patel and Mumtaz Patel, the son and daughter of Ahmed Patel, who had won from the Bharuch seat three times in the 1970s and 1980s.

Faisal Patel said Congress workers were not happy with the decision to cede the seat under the INDIA alliance agreement, but added that he would abide by the decision of the Congress high command.

Asserting he would meet the party's central leadership, Ahmed Patel's son said, "There is still a lot of time for nomination and election. A lot of things can still happen. My father did a lot for the people of Bharuch. This is our seat. The workers and I are against this alliance but we will accept whatever the party say." Faisal Patel claimed he would win the seat if the Congress gave him ticket from Bharuch. He had earlier staked claim to contest from Bharuch, saying he and "conscientious" Congress workers would not support the AAP candidate.

AAP's Chaitar Vasava will contest from Bharuch and Umeshbhai Makwana from Bhavnagar.

Ahmed Patel's daughter Mumtaz Patel issued an apology on social media to Congress workers and asked them to regroup to strengthen the party.

On the decision regarding Punjab, AAP leader Sandeep Pathak said, "People are very intelligent and they understand everything."

The campaign strategy of the INDIA bloc will be discussed at a later stage, he said and asserted that the tie-up will upset the "calculations and strategy" of the BJP.

Stressing that the opposition alliance was strong, Pathak said the polls would be fought by the INDIA bloc with AAP and Congress candidates contesting on different seats.

He also alleged that the BJP was eliminating institutions in the country and sending opposition leaders to jail to win the polls. Farmers have also been treated unjustly and people are suffering from inflation and unemployment, Pathak charged.

Addressing a press conference in Panaji, the Congress' Goa unit president Amit Patkar and the AAP's state chief Amit Palekar asked all opposition parties in the coastal state to join hands to defeat the BJP in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Currently, the South Goa seat is held by the Congress, while the North Goa seat is with the BJP.

"I appeal to all those MLAs who sought votes against the BJP in the 2022 Assembly polls but then joined hands with the ruling party to support the opposition. The Revolutionary Goans Party must also join our alliance," Patkar said.

Currently, the South Goa seat is held by the Congress, while the North Goa seat is with the ruling BJP.

Commenting on the seat-sharing agreement between the Congress and the AAP, BJP leader and Union minister Hardeep Puri said the most curious part of this "dysfunctional" alliance is that "they will be together in Delhi, but against each other in Punjab".

"The path to hell (or in this case political oblivion!) is paved with skewed alliances," he said in a post on X.

"If the opportunist alliance between the AAP and the Congress even manages to survive its inherent contradictions it will be the most bizarre political combination in every sense. One that tries to pull the wool over the eyes of their own voters," Puri added.

Union Minister Meenakshi Lekhi and Delhi BJP chief Virendra Sachdeva told a press conference that in the states where the alliance matters, be it Gujarat, Haryana, Chandigarh, Goa or the national capital, the BJP had got well over 50 per cent votes in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

This "corrupt" alliance will not work against those known for serving the people, Lekhi said, citing

numerous allegations of corruption that AAP leaders had levelled against the Congress in the past.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 29-2-2024

BJP-led NDA will top 400-seat tally in Lok Sabha polls; next five years will see rapid development: PM Modi

Modi slammed the Congress over pending irrigation projects in the country, especially in the Vidarbha region of eastern Maharashtra

PTI, Yavatmal

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday asserted that the ruling BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) will cross the 400-seat mark in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls and said the next five years will see rapid development in the country.

Speaking at a public rally in Yavatmal district, Modi slammed the Congress over pending irrigation projects in the country, especially in the Vidarbha region of eastern Maharashtra, where the district is located.

"We (BJP-led NDA) will cross the 400-seat tally this time," Modi said ahead of the Lok Sabha polls which are likely to be held in April-May.

The Lok Sabha has a total of 543 seats.

"The coming five years will see rapid development," the Prime Minister maintained.

He attacked former Union minister Sharad Pawar and said when he handled the agriculture portfolio (in the Congress-led UPA government from 2004 to 2014), financial packages would be announced for farmers, but the money would be siphoned off before it could reach the beneficiaries.

The PM said prior to 2014, the year when the BJP came to power at the Centre, of the 100 families, only 15 had access to piped water in the country.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 25-2-2024

Most political parties want single-phase elections: CEC

Says misuse of public money won't be tolerated

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, In a stern message to political parties ahead of the General Election, the Election Commission of India (ECI) today said any misuse of public money would not be tolerated during the elections.

Addressing a press conference in Chennai where the poll body had gone to supervise preparations for the Lok Sabha elections, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rajiv Kumar said the ECI was determined to conduct free and fair elections.

Most of the political parties sought single-phase elections, Kumar said, while referring to the ECI's meeting with various national and state-level parties in Tamil Nadu.

"All collectors and enforcement agencies have been told that we want inducement-free elections. We want free, fair and transparent elections. By inducement-free, we mean that the misuse of money in the elections will not be tolerated," he said.

The ECI, he added, had zero tolerance towards distribution of money or freebies or inducement in any other form. He said the enforcement agencies had been directed to stay vigilant to prevent the distribution of cash and freebies. The National Payments Corporation of India has also been tasked to monitor online transactions.

In response to a question on fake news, Kumar said, "Today, fake news is running that election dates have been announced. This was, however, countered within 30 minutes."

"We met various political parties. A majority of them want single-phase elections, check on the distribution of money and freebies," he said. The parties also sought action to prevent voter impersonation, distribution of liquor and transfer of money through online mode, he added.

THE HINDU, DELHI 16-2-2024

Unbonded: On the striking down of the Electoral Bond Scheme by the Supreme Court

The electoral bonds verdict is a blow for freedom of expression

Anonymous donations of high value tend to undermine electoral democracy and governance as they facilitate a quid pro quo culture involving donors and beneficiaries. In striking down the Electoral Bond Scheme (EBS) under which anyone could buy electoral bonds and donate them to political parties for encashment, the Supreme Court of India has recognised this malaise and struck a blow for democracy and transparency in political funding. The Court found that the entire scheme violates the Constitution, especially the voters' right to information. It further found manifestly arbitrary, the amendment to the Companies Act that removed the cap of 7.5% of a company's profit that can be donated to political parties without any requirement to disclose details of the recipient parties in its profit and loss accounts. It has also mandated disclosure of donation details since 2019. The judgment is one more in a long line of verdicts the Court has handed down to promote voter rights and preserve the purity of elections. Its earlier interventions led to the featuring of

the 'None of the Above' option on the ballot, the removal of the protection given to legislators from immediate disqualification on conviction for a criminal offence, the mandatory disclosure of the assets and criminal antecedents of candidates in their election affidavits and expedited trials for MPs and MLAs involved in criminal offences.

The Court's reasoning is unexceptionable. It found that the primary justification for the EBS — curbing the use of 'black money' for political or electoral funding by allowing donations through banking channels — failed the test of proportionality, as it was not the least restrictive measure to abridge the voters' right to know. It has made the logical connection between unidentified corporate donations and the likelihood of policy decisions being tailored to suit the donors. The judgment is a natural follow-up to a principle it had laid down years ago that the voters' freedom of expression under Article 19(1)(a) will be incomplete without access to information on a candidate's background. The principle has now been extended to removing the veil on corporate donors who may have been funding ruling parties in exchange for favours. While the verdict may help ease the hold that donors may have on governance through money power, a question that arises is whether the validity of the scheme could have been decided earlier or the issuance of bonds on a regular basis stayed. How much of the thousands of crores of rupees given to parties under this scheme resulted in policy measures favourable to the donors or helped fund the deployment of additional campaign resources will never be known. This was a fit case for the grant of an interim stay.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 16-2-2024

Express View on SC's electoral bonds judgment: A vital verdict

Introducing the electoral bonds scheme in Union Budget 2017-18, the then finance minister, Arun Jaitley, had underlined that transparency in political funding is fundamental to the fairness of the election process. However, rather than helping clean up the shadowy world of poll finance, the electoral bonds scheme, which Jaitley had called the first step, had, over the years, invited criticism for increasing the system's opacity. Concerns over the scheme's structure based on anonymous donations were voiced even by the Election Commission and the Reserve Bank of India. The bonds allowed donors and parties to keep their association hidden from the public — the State Bank of India, a government-owned bank, and not an independent institution like the RBI, could track the donations. The Supreme Court's decision to strike down the changes in the law introduced to create electoral bonds is, therefore, enormously welcome, especially because it is

anchored in the citizen's right to know. A five-judge bench headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud ruled that the donor secrecy provision is "unconstitutional" and "arbitrary and violative of Article 14". CJI Chandrachud set the tone for the verdict by stressing that, "information about funding of political parties is essential for the effective exercise of the choice of voting." In the name of informational privacy, electoral bonds restrict the Right to Information to an unacceptable extent, the bench held unanimously.

Studies by the Association for Democratic Reforms show that the BJP garnered the lion's share of the bonds issued in the first tranche. Analysis of declaration data shows that in the six years since the scheme was introduced, around 55 per cent of the funds extended through the bonds have gone to the BJP — Congress came a distant second with less than 10 per cent. A report in this paper in November 2019 revealed the lopsided nature of this financing system — electoral bonds with denominations of Rs 1 crore accounted for more than 91 per cent of the Rs 5,896 crore raised in the first 11 phases of the sale of bonds. All this lent credence to allegations of corruption and cronyism, and perceptions of an uneven playing field. The government maintained that donor anonymity was necessary to shield contributors from potential retribution. But as the five-judge bench pointed out, "at a primary level, political contributions... enhance access to legislators. This access also translates to influence over policy making. There is also a legitimate possibility that financial contributions to a political party would lead to a quid pro quo arrangement because of the close nexus between money and politics." The court has also pointed out that the ability of a company to influence the electoral process through political contributions is much higher when compared to that of an individual — both in terms of the quantum of money contributed, and the purpose of such contributions.

Attempts to make political funding more transparent must continue. As the SC has said, "There are means other than electoral bonds to achieve that purpose". The government must be guided by the principles of transparency and accountability as it gives the issue a deeper look. That's the central message of the SC's landmark verdict.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 27-2-2024

Tractor march: Farmers block highway linking Delhi, heavy traffic at Noida border

HT News Desk

The tractor march is being taken out by farmers affiliated with the Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU) Tikait and BKU Lokshakti.

Traffic was disrupted as farmers took out a tractor march in Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Saharanpur, Baghpat, Hapur and Amroha, blocking the left lane of highways by parking their tractors.

In Meerut, the farmers and Bharatiya Kisan Union (Tikait) activists jammed the NH 58 at Mohiuddinpur. The BKU has given call to park tractors at Highways to express their solidarity with farmers protesting in Punjab and Haryana for their demands.

Tikait on Monday said the tractor march is being carried out so that the Narendra Modi government listens to them and not forget the farmers.

"A programme to take out a 'Tractor chain' has been decided. Tractors will be parked on the highway that leads to Delhi, especially the divider highway...It was decided to register a different kind of protest so that the government would listen to us and not forget the farmers," Tikait, who was at the forefront of the 2020-21 agitation against the Centre's now repealed farm laws, told ANI.

"We had gone to Chandigarh for a meeting of Sanyukt Morcha. We have formed a 6-member committee. It has been formed to hold dialogues with all the farmer organisations that are separate from Sanyukt Morcha...If any organisation wants to join the Sanyukt Morcha, it can have a dialogue with the committee," he added.

The tractor march is being taken out by farmers affiliated with the Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU) Tikait and BKU Lokshakti.

"We (farmers) have not received a message (from the government) yet. The path to having a dialogue is always open. We are protesting here to have a conversation. So, whenever there will be one, we will attend the meeting," a farmer leader was quoted by PTI as saying during a press conference.

Traffic likely to be hit on Delhi-Noida border

Traffic is likely to be affected at the Delhi-Noida border on Monday in view of a proposed tractor march of farmers to the national capital, officials told PTI. Farmers have planned a protest march on tractors via the Yamuna Expressway, Lohari toll plaza and Mahamaya flyover.

The Delhi Police has intensified checking at the border by putting up barricades. There was heavy traffic at the Chilla border from Delhi towards Noida due to the checking.

According to the Gautam Buddha Nagar Police, intensive checking will be conducted by the Delhi Police as well as the district police by installing barriers at all the border points between the national capital and Noida, and traffic will be diverted in accordance with the situation.

The 'Delhi Chalo' protest march is being spearheaded by the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the

Kisan Mazdoor Morcha. The agitation is taking place to put pressure on the Centre to accept farmers' demands, including a legal guarantee of minimum support price (MSP) for crops and a farm loan waiver.

The farmers will continue to stay put at the two border points till February 29, when the next course of action will be decided, farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher was quoted by PTI as saying.

Farmer leaders had on Wednesday put the 'Delhi Chalo' march on hold for two days after a protester was killed and about 12 police personnel were injured in clashes at Khanauri.

(With bureau and agency inputs)

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 28-2-2024

‘Dilli Chalo’ protest: Another Punjab farmer dies, sixth in 15 days

Got lung infection after tear gas shell firing: Family

Mohit Khanna

Patiala, Another farmer, who was protesting at the Khanauri border, died after suffering a heart attack at the Government Rajindra Hospital here on Tuesday. According to representatives of Bharatiya Kisan Union (Krantikari), its activist Karnail Singh (62) from Arno Khurd village near Patran died on Monday morning. With Karnail's death, six farmers have died during the ongoing 'Dilli Chalo' protest at the Punjab-Haryana border in the last 15 days. According to a statement issued by BKU (Krantikari) chairman Surjeet Singh Phul, Karnail got lung infection due to smoke of a tear gas shell that was fired by the Haryana Police at protesters on the Khanauri border on February 21. A marginal farmer, Karnail is survived by wife, two sons and three daughters. The representatives of the union said Karnail owned 1.5 acres and had a debt of around Rs 8 lakh.

Karnail's youngest son Gurpreet Singh said his father had left the house to join a dharna on February 13. "During the protest on February 21, a tear gas shell exploded near him. After inhaling the gas, he developed serious breathing issues. Many other farmers were also injured in the incident. Shubhkaran Singh (21) was also shot dead during the protest," said Gurpreet.

BKU Sidhupur's spokesperson Gurdeep Singh said Karnail kept taking medicine, but refused to return from the protest site. On Monday, Karnail's condition deteriorated following which he was rushed to a hospital in Patran from where he was referred to the Rajindra Hospital in Patiala where he died," said Gurdeep. Earlier on February 14, Gyan Singh (63) of Chachehi village of Gurdaspur, died after suffering a heart attack at the Shambhu border. On February 18, Manjit Singh (72) of Patiala, also died due to a heart attack at the

Khanauri border. Gyan Singh's family, too, had complained that he had fallen ill after inhaling tear gas.

On February 18 evening, Narinder Pal Singh (43) from a village in Patiala passed away due to a heart attack while on his way back from a dharna outside BJP leader Capt Amarinder Singh's house in Patiala. On February 22, Darshan Singh (62) of Amargarh village of Bathinda district, died following a cardiac arrest at the Khanauri border. He had joined the dharna on February 12 after wedding of his son on February 6.

Under debt of Rs 8 lakh

A marginal farmer, Karnail Singh is survived by wife, two sons and three daughters. Union leaders said Karnail owned 1.5 acres and had a debt of around Rs 8 lakh.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 25-2-2024

Farmers everywhere are rising in protest. Governments must pay attention

K C Tyagi, Bishan Nehwal

The smell of freshly ploughed soil, the vibrant picture of crops swaying in the wind, hard hands nurturing life from the soil — these are the images that often define our perception of farmers. Yet, behind this pleasant facade lies a bitter truth: Today, farmers across the world face unprecedented challenges, their livelihoods at risk, their rights being trampled upon. This is not just their fight, it is everyone's fight. Even today, lakhs of Indian farmers have left their homes to surround the borders of Delhi.

From the sun-baked plains of India to the fertile valleys of Europe, farmers are rising up in unity to fight for farmers' rights, their voices echoing the call for justice and demand for change. Falling prices of produce, rising costs of crops, heavy regulations, powerful retailers, debt burden, land acquisition, climate change and cheap imports are at the root of their problems. In the last few days, farmers were seen protesting on the streets in France, Italy, Romania, Poland, Greece, Germany, Portugal and the Netherlands. This is not just a collection of sporadic protests; it is a growing global movement, a call for unity in the face of adversity. In India, after the repeal of controversial farm laws in 2021, chants of "Jai Kisan!" resounded. And now, farmers are back on the streets once again demanding legalisation of minimum support price (MSP) for all crops. This time, their movement shows the universality of their demands, beyond Punjab and Haryana, covering different regions and crops.

Meanwhile, in Europe, Dutch dairy farmers held their iconic milk protests, blocking highways and supermarkets, protesting low milk prices and

demanding fair compensation for their labour. Their plight resonates with Spanish olive growers facing similar challenges, highlighting the vulnerabilities of small-scale farmers across the continent. Recently, in France, lakhs of farmers had surrounded the capital, laying siege to many highways and airports of the country. Across the Atlantic, in Brazil, indigenous communities and small farmers are uniting against capitalist corporate giants of agribusiness, their struggle emblematic of the global land rights struggle. Their resistance against deforestation and corporate encroachment is adding another layer to the story of farmers' struggles, weaving a tale of environmental and social justice.

There are unsettling similarities in the issues plaguing farmers around the world, the fabric of their struggle woven with threads of exploitation, marginalisation and broken promises. Where volatile markets make them sensitive to price fluctuations, they get very low prices for their produce while consumers pay exorbitant prices. Corporate integration into the food system coupled with exploitative market forces squeezes farmers, leaving them with marginal profits. A 2020 Oxfam report found that farmers receive only 1–8 per cent of the final retail price of food. In times of competition, corporate consolidation concentrates power in the hands of a few, driving small farmers out of the market. Climate change adds another layer of uncertainty, threatening crop yields and livelihoods. The debt burden on farmers everywhere is heavy.

In India, farmer suicides remain a grim reality, a reminder of the frustration caused by increasing financial pressures. Farmers often face heavy debt due to high input costs (seeds, fertilisers, pesticides) and unpredictable market prices. A 2022 World Bank report estimates that 500 million smallholder farmers globally are trapped in the debt cycle.

Land eviction in the name of industrialisation and infrastructure development also remains a big problem for farmers. Corporations and governments acquiring land and displacing farmers without any rehabilitation policy are destroying their livelihoods and cultural heritage. According to the Land Matrix Initiative, more than one million hectares of farmers' land was taken away globally between 2016 and 2020. Irregular weather patterns, droughts and floods destroy crops, threaten food security and push farmers into poverty. The World Bank estimates that climate change could push an additional 26 million people into poverty by 2030, primarily in rural areas. Smallholder farmers often lack access to essential resources such as water, credit and information, adversely affecting their productivity and resilience. The FAO estimates that 3.2 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water, and 2.3 billion do not have access to basic sanitation, with disproportionate impacts on rural communities.

Governments should not ignore this global rebellion. History shows that when farmers and labourers, fed up with exploitation, raise their voices against the government, they can overthrow it, be it during the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Chinese Revolution under the leadership of Mao or the Indian Peasant Movement. In all three situations, there was significant rural discontent arising from poverty, land distribution issues, and exploitation by powerful elites. In Russia, landless peasants and agricultural workers faced harsh conditions under Tsarist rule. In China, farmers were under the rule of oppressive landlords and feudal lords, whereas in India, farmers are struggling with low crop prices, debt burden and inadequate government support amid a capitalist system.

In all the global revolutions that have taken place, collective action has played an important role in challenging the status quo. The movements of farmers and workers are not limited to just protests and strikes. If the problems of farmers are not addressed in time, it will have dire consequences.

The seeds of change are being sown — now is the time to nurture them, develop global conversations and work together to build a future where farmers thrive, communities thrive. The earth can be nourished and taken care of continuously. The fight for farmers' rights is not just about protecting their livelihoods; it is about securing our collective food future. It is a fight for a better future for us and future generations.

Their demands are not just about economic security; they represent a call for a more just and sustainable food system that values farmers as stewards of the land and recognises their vital role in feeding the world. It is time for the government too to ignore the powerful vested interests standing in the way and reform systems. This is a step towards realising the vision of an inclusive and equitable society where every farmer will be empowered to live with dignity and prosperity.

Tyagi is a former member of Parliament and Nehwal is an agripreneur

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 21-2-2024

Era of bomb blasts in J&K replaced by development: PM hails 370 move

Ravi Krishan Khajuria

Jammu & Kashmir has exited the era of bomb blasts and entered the age of development, Prime Minister Narendra Modi told a public rally on Tuesday, hailing the government's decision to revoke Article 370, slamming dynasty politics for keeping the region deprived of growth, and urging people in the Union territory to propel the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) past 370 seats and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) across the 400 mark in the upcoming general elections.

Modi, speaking in Maulana Azad Stadium in Jammu City where he lay the foundation stone of development projects worth 32,000 crore across the region, described Article 370 as a wall that thwarted the development of Jammu & Kashmir, and said that it was now razed to the ground.

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“Article 370 was the biggest wall in the development of J&K, and BJP razed it. We will fulfil the unfulfilled dreams of the last 70 years of the people of J&K in the next few years — this is Modi’s guarantee, which is guaranteed,” he said.

The term “Modi ki guarantee” is one of the buzzwords of the BJP in the run up to the Lok Sabha elections.

“See the power of 370. After its revocation, today, I have the courage to ask the countrymen to give 370 (seats) to BJP in the coming elections and take NDA beyond 400 mark,” he said. “Now, J&K is cruising on the path of balanced and holistic development. I have heard that a movie on Article 370 will be released soon. I think your story (people of J&K) is going to be told to the nation,” the PM added.

The Union government, through a bill in Parliament, revoked Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution — which gave special status and special privileges to the erstwhile state of Jammu & Kashmir — on August 5, 2019.

“There was a time when only sad news like bomb blasts, guns, kidnappings and separatism emerged from J&K. Such things had become the misfortune of Jammu and Kashmir. But now Jammu and Kashmir is moving forward with the determination to develop. Today itself, the foundation stone of projects worth over 32,000 crores has been laid and some have been inaugurated. These are projects related to education, skills, employment, health, industry and connectivity,” he said.

In the context of the Article 370 move, Modi also said that his government was upholding the Constitution by conferring fundamental rights and reservation to refugees from the Valmiki community, Gadda Brahmin community, Kohlis, and Kashmiri Pandits.

“After revocation of Article 370, the women in J&K got their rights from which they were deprived for decades together,” he said, and pointed to the tourism boom in the region over the past four years.

The projects relate to several sectors, including health, education, rail, road, aviation, petroleum, and civic infrastructure, among others. The Prime Minister also distributed appointment orders to about 1500 new government recruits from Jammu and Kashmir. He also interacted with beneficiaries of various government schemes as part of the ‘Viksit Bharat Viksit Jammu’ program.

PM Modi also flagged off the first electric train in the valley and also the train service between Sangaldan station and Baramulla station.

Modi, on his first visit to J&K since an April 2022 rally at Palli village in Samba, said that the youth of the region were now liberating themselves from dynastic politics — a reference not just to the Congress at the national level but the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the National Conference (NC) in the Union territory.

“For several decades J&K remained a victim of dynastic politics. Those who ran governments here always watched their self interests and never cared about hopes and aspirations of the people. And if someone bore the largest brunt of it, it was our youth,” he said.

“A government whose priority is the welfare of just one family cannot think of the welfare of the common people. I am happy to see Jammu and Kashmir is getting free from the dynastic rule,” Modi added.

J&K sends five members to Parliament — two from Jammu (currently held by the BJP) and three in the Kashmir valley (currently held by the NC).

Among the attendees was former J&K deputy CM Muzaffar Hussain Baig of the PDP, sparking some speculation that he may switch over to the BJP ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. The leader, however, said he had just come to see India’s Prime Minister.

Modi said that no one will be left out of J&K’s development story.

“We will make J&K developed in the next few years and fulfil the unfulfilled dreams of the past 70 years,” he asserted.

He recalled his Lalkar Rally at the same venue in 2013, before he was prime minister, when he had raised questions why J&K can’t have top higher education institutions. “Today J&K has IIT, IIM and two AIIMS. That’s why people refer to Modi’s guarantee. There were days when schools were burnt and today the schools are decorated,” Modi said.

The Prime Minister also blamed the Congress for “sitting on” the one rank, one pension (OROP) demand of the armed forces for 40 years.

“They (Congress) kept telling lies and peddled fake promises to the soldiers but it was eventually done by the BJP government. Because of OROP, ex-servicemen in J&K alone got over 1,600 crores in benefits,” he said.

Modi referred to his recent visit to Gulf countries, saying there was positivity in West Asia among people who were keen on investing in J&K. “Today there is enthusiasm among the world towards J&K, successful G20 meet in Kashmir has made an impact around the world. The entire world is impressed immensely by natural beauty, tradition, culture and hospitality of people of J&K,” he said.

Reacting to the PM's comments, J&K Pradesh Congress Committee working president Raman Bhalla said, "The youth find themselves in a very precarious situation with no hope in sight in the near future. Much disappointing fact about the speech was the stoic silence of the PM over the regularization of about 80,000 daily wagers, casual labourers, need- based, adhoc based workers in various departments who along with their families are suffering for decades."

National Conference spokesperson Imran Nabi Dar said that most of the projects that the Prime Minister inaugurated were announced during UPA years.

"As far as his statement on Article 370 is concerned, there is no empirical data available that can suggest that it was an impediment to development. In fact, if one goes through the official data released by government agencies prior to abrogation, the indices of development in J&K were far better than most states in the country. The same BJP was earlier saying that 370 was responsible for militancy in the region but now that rhetoric has completely faded from their narratives, for reasons known to them," he said.

PDP additional spokesman Rafeeq Rather said the visit seems more political. "We welcome development if it really takes place. Since election are nearer thus BJP is trying to lure people on fake and false slogans and promises. Even today in such a cold weather government schools were used along students and employees to listen to the live speech of PM. The way men and machinery is being used in BJP propagation is evident from today's program at Jammu," he said.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 22-2-2024

Mirwaiz moves HC over not being allowed to lead prayers, J&K admin given 'last opportunity' to respond

Naveed Iqbal

After his absence from Srinagar's Jamia Masjid for nearly three months, Mirwaiz Umer Farooq has approached the High Court of J&K and Ladakh challenging continued restrictions on his religious duties. Justice Wasim Sadiq Nargal has given the J&K administration a "last and final opportunity" for the senior additional advocate general to respond to the concerns raised in his petition.

Mirwaiz's writ petition had sought directions from the court to the J&K Chief Secretary, Department of Home and the police chief in Kashmir "not to create any impediments in the day-to-day life of the petitioner, including his free movement as a citizen, and to allow him to perform and enjoy the freedom and liberty guaranteed to petitioner under the Constitution".

After receiving no response from the Senior AAG, the court on February 19, "reluctantly and in the interest of justice", provided another week's time to respond to the petition. The case is listed again on March 6.

The court also stated this "shall be the last and final opportunity" for the UT to respond.

Mirwaiz was released from detention at his residence in September, but has not been allowed to lead Friday prayers at Jamia Masjid since October. In his petition, he argued that he has been placed in "illegal detention" and that this is "discrimination in real sense and in real perspective", which goes against Article 14 of the Constitution of India.

The petition also stated that "such unwarranted action of respondents is a deliberate attempt to hurt the religious sentiments of people of J&K", and that his liberty of movement should be restored by the intervention of the court.

He told The Indian Express, "After my release in September 2023 after one four years of arbitrary house detention, I was only allowed to attend three consecutive Friday congregations in Jamia Masjid. Since then, I have been prevented from going to Jamia Masjid on Fridays or addressing the faithful in any other mosque of religious congregations as the Mirwaiz."

He said that whenever the Anjuman (the mosque's management committee) approached the authorities "they dilly dallied on the response, saying they will check with their higher-ups and get back, which they never do".

While he is allowed to travel with security on other days of the week and also took a trip to Delhi recently, Mirwaiz said that "despite the important religious occasion of Shab-e-Miraj, I was again not allowed to go to Jamia Masjid".

With Ramzan approaching and daily prayers taking place at the grand mosque among other religious duties he leads, he said that he is concerned he may not be allowed to leave home again.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 29-2-2024

Centre bans 2 J&K Muslim Conference factions, Amit Shah says Modi govt determined to uproot terrorism

Express Web Desk

The Centre on Wednesday banned the Muslim Conference Jammu & Kashmir (Sumji faction) and Muslim Conference Jammu & Kashmir (Bhat faction), declaring them as "unlawful associations."

In a post on X, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said the "activities of the two factions were against the sovereignty and integrity of the nation."

Amit Shah further asserted that Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government is determined to uproot terrorism and anyone involved in unlawful activities will face dire consequences.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Ministry of Home Affairs extended the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) Jammu and Kashmir for another five years with immediate effect declaring it as an 'unlawful association'.

Confirming the same, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said, "Pursuing PM Modi's policy of zero tolerance against terrorism and separatism, the government has extended the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami, Jammu Kashmir for five years."

"The organisation is found continuing its activities against the security, integrity and sovereignty of the nation. The outfit was first declared an 'Unlawful Association' on 28 February 2019. Anyone threatening the security of the nation will face ruthless measures," he said in a post on X.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 19-2-2024

AL wants to ban opposition parties

Alleges Moyeen Khan

UNB, Dhaka

The ruling Awami League wants to ban opposition parties in the country to further consolidate its power, alleged BNP senior leader Abdul Moyeen Khan yesterday.

"The Awami League has exerted control over both the judiciary and parliament in its quest to perpetuate power. They now want to obliterate opposition parties," he said.

Talking to reporters at the grave site of BNP founder Ziaur Rahman, Moyeen added, "The bottom line is that this regime wants to ban the opposition parties in the country since it does not believe in democracy."

Earlier, the leaders and workers of Jatiyatabadi Tanti Dal, led by Moyeen Khan, paid homage The Zia by placing wreaths at his grave, marking the 44th founding anniversary of the associate body of BNP.

About the 12th parliament election, Moyeen said the results were predetermined, with the government preselecting winners for each seat before the January 7 election day. "That's why the people of the country boycotted the election."

He said there is no democracy in this country as the government has usurped power snatching the voting rights of people. "Even, the major international media outlets are saying that Bakshal-2 has been established in Bangladesh."

The BNP leader said the people liberated the country through a bloody war to establish democracy and the

economic emancipation of the poor and to get rid of autocracy and exploitation by the Pakistanis.

"The Awami League government has undermined the main spirit of the country's Liberation War as it erased democracy and snatched the right to vote," he said.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 25-2-2024

BNP patronising hoarders: Quader

PM blaming BNP to mislead people: Rizvi

Staff Correspondent

BNP is patronising hoarders to create an anarchic situation in the country centering prices of essential commodities, said Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader yesterday.

"It's the old syndicate of BNP who are doing it (hoarding commodities to create an artificial crisis)," said Quader.

He was speaking at a press briefing held at the AL president's political office in Dhanmondi.

Quader also warned that those who are behind the price hike will not be spared.

"There is no reason to think that the government has given up on controlling commodity prices. The UNB, Dhaka Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina blamed BNP for the hike in the prices of essential commodities just to mislead people and hide her government's failure, said BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi yesterday.

Mentionable, during her Friday press conference at Gono Bhaban, the PM mentioned that individuals seeking to overthrow the government are conspiring to raise commodity prices.

"Her statement implies that the autocracy she leads has deteriorated, leaving Sheikh Hasina with no option but to resort to blatant falsehoods and unsubstantiated claims, hence relying on absurd lies," said Rizvi while speaking at a press briefing at the party's Nayapaltan central office.

While doing so (blaming BNP), the premier has all but confirmed that prices of essentials have spiraled out of control, Rizvi added.

He said the prime minister has failed to rein in the dishonest businesspeople spearheading her administration.

"The looter government does not have minimum competence to control the market," he added.

The BNP leader said ordinary citizens are facing severe challenges to sustain themselves due to the soaring prices of all goods.

Regarding the status of jailed BNP leaders, Rizvi alleged BNP chairperson's advisory council member Habibur Rahman Habib is seriously ill, but the jail

authorities are not providing him with necessary treatment.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 19-2-2024

Raushan announces JP council for Mar 9

Rift widens as GM Quader, Chunnu sidelined

Rashidul Hasan

The feud within the Jatiyo Party, the main opposition in parliament, has reached new heights as the party's chief patron Raushan Ershad yesterday announced the party's council will be held on March 9.

Raushan made the announcement at a press conference held at her Gulshan residence.

On January 28, Raushan relieved JP chairman GM Quader and Secretary General Mujibul Haque Chunnu from their posts and announced to take charge as the party's chairman.

However, GM Quader and Chunnu maintain Raushan has no authority to sack them from the party or convene JP's council.

Raushan said, "Our beloved organisation Jatiyo Party is now in grave danger. In view of the demands of the leaders and activists, I am announcing the 10th council of Jatiyo Party on March 9 to get rid of the situation and to reorganise the party."

Kazi Feroz Rashid who was relieved from the party for siding Raushan, was made the convener of the council preparation committee while JP leader Syed Abu Hossain co-convener and Golam Sarwar Milon joint convener.

Shafiqul Islam Sentu, another top JP leader of Dhaka north city unit who was expelled from the party recently by GM Quader, was made member-secretary of the council preparation committee.

Addressing the press conference, Raushan, the immediate past opposition leader, said, "Many leaders and activists of all levels of JP are standing by my side."

"The main area of practising democracy in a political party is the timely national council of the party. The three-year term of Jatiyo Party's council has expired long ago," she added.

Raushan's son Rahgir Almahi, also known as Saad Ershad, and several JP leaders who were expelled from the party at different times were also present at the press conference.

Meanwhile, Chunnu while talking to reporters at the JP chairman's Banani office said the party's chairman (GM Quader) will take disciplinary actions against Syed Abu Hossain as he participated in the press briefing without resigning from JP.

JP had participated from a record 265 seats in the recently held parliamentary election but managed to win

in only 11 seats -- the worst result of the party since 1991.

Raushan and her son did not participate in the election due to their conflict with GM Quader.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 29-2-2024

Political Manoeuvrings Keep Parties Busy ahead of Polls

Lakdev Liyanagama

Election time brings out the best and worst in political parties. This was in ample display last week. Both in Government and Opposition political groups, factions and individuals are jostling with each other, trying to be in the winning camp at the end of the Presidential Elections (PE) and General Elections (GE).

Perhaps the worst affected is the main Opposition party in Parliament, the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) led by Leader of the Opposition Sajith Premadasa. Formed in 2019 as a breakaway faction of the United National Party (UNP), the party is now facing an imminent reversal of its fortunes.

The reason for the creation of the SJB five years ago was Premadasa's ambition of leading the UNP being thwarted time and again, with Ranil Wickremesinghe remaining its Leader since the mid-nineties. Premadasa contested the 2019 Presidential Election as the UNP candidate but lost to Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Economic crisis

Facing a stint in the Opposition and feeling stifled by Wickremesinghe loyalists in the UNP, he did not realise the expectation of leading the party. At the time, UNP Leader Wickremesinghe's popularity was not at its peak.

This led to Premadasa forming the SJB and taking with him many stalwarts of the party, except for a handful who remained loyal to the UNP leader. The SJB performed creditably at the August 2020 GE, winning 54 Parliamentary Seats. In contrast, the UNP was reduced to just one National List (NL) seat.

After this performance by the SJB, Premadasa's decision to split from his parent party appeared to be justified. However, that all changed when Premadasa refused then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's offer to form a Government in the wake of the economic crisis that led to his resignation in 2022. A similar offer was also made to National People's Power Leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD), but he also refused.

Unexpectedly, Wickremesinghe first became Prime Minister, then Acting President and was then chosen by Parliament, with the support of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), as the President for the remainder of former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's term (until October-November 2024). The astute political strategist

that he is, President Wickremesinghe has since been wooing SJB Parliamentarians to his side, with some degree of success.

By that time three SJB MPs, Diana Gamage, Harin Fernando and Manusha Nanayakkara had already joined the Government. Gamage even pledged support to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa for the 20th Amendment to the Constitution in 2021. Fernando and Nanayakkara were sworn in as Ministers in May 2022, at the height of the economic crisis.

Ironically, while Premadasa has been able to keep most of the SJB intact since then, it is his own actions in inviting individuals who are defecting from the SLPP and some ex-military figures to link with the SJB, that are driving his MPs back to the UNP. Many SJB Parliamentarians and electoral organisers have privately questioned the wisdom of this strategy.

Partner parties

Among those who have been invited to cooperate with the SJB, though not officially joining their party, are Prof. G.L. Peiris, Dr. Nalaka Godahewa, Dilan Perera and Prof. Channa Jayasumana. Many SJBERS query whether having these individuals – with links to the Rajapaksa regimes – will be an asset to the SJB.

There was some disquiet among some ‘partner’ parties of the SJB particularly about Prof. Jayasumana. That is because, in 2019, Jayasumana was instrumental in initiating a campaign against Dr. Shafi Shihabdeen alleging that the latter was involved in sterilising Sinhalese women without their consent.

Dr. Shihabdeen was later exonerated of all the charges against him and reinstated in service. Parties, especially minority parties which were in alliance with the SJB were unhappy with the move to accommodate Prof. Jayasumana on the SJB platform as it would cause considerable damage to the SJB’s image as a secular entity.

If the SJB’s MPs and their partner parties had issues with these matters, the discussions around them occurred in party circles within closed doors although some rumblings of dissent filtered through to the media. That however changed with the inclusion of former Army Commander Gen. (Retd) Daya Ratnayake.

Chairman of the SJB, Field Marshal (FM) Sarath Fonseka was quite irked by this move. This is due to Ratnayake being the ‘Evidence Gathering Officer’ against Fonseka in the latter’s Court Martial. This was seen largely as a political witch hunt against FM Fonseka for contesting the 2010 PE.

Public statements

Never known for his diplomacy, FM Fonseka made his sentiments very clear in public, questioning the ethics of inviting Gen. Ratnayake. Premadasa also responded publicly stating he was aware of persons who are

talented and capable of serving the party and no one should prevent them from joining the SJB.

This war of words has now ratcheted to another level. Fonseka has obtained a Stay Order to prevent his removal as SJB Chairman and organiser for Kelaniya. It is a sign that the parting of ways between Premadasa and Fonseka – once tipped as Premadasa’s Defence Minister in a future SJB Government – is inevitable.

The net effect of all this disquiet within the SJB is that, at the District level, SJB MPs who were previously confident of re-election are now having second thoughts. They fear the SJB will implode in the coming months. So, they are actively exploring a return to their old political home, the UNP.

If the SJB is being threatened with division, that has already undermined the prime position enjoyed by the SLPP. When elected to power in August 2019, it won a near two-third majority or 145 seats and was able to muster that majority to pass the 20th Amendment to the Constitution in October 2020.

The SLPP’s stranglehold on Parliament has diminished since then with the resignation of Gotabaya Rajapaksa from the Presidency and the removal of many party seniors from the Cabinet by Rajapaksa himself prior to his resignation. In the interim, many SLPP members have become ‘independent’.

Nominal leader

These include the thirteen-member group led by Dullas Alahapperuma and Prof. Peiris (some of whom have now linked with the SJB), the group led by Vasudeva Nanayakkara, Wimal Weerawansa and Udaya Gammanpila and another group of which the nominal leader is Anura Priyadarshana Yapa.

As confusing as it may be, there is also a group within the SLPP who proclaim their continued allegiance to the SLPP in general and to former President Mahinda Rajapaksa in particular but also state repeatedly in public that Sri Lanka’s best choice as the next President is Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Those in this group include Minister Prasanna Ranatunga and former Minister Mahindananda Aluthgamage. Ranatunga has especially made it clear numerous times that it is his personal view that President Wickremesinghe should be given another term as Executive President to resurrect the economy.

These statements are being made in the context of no official announcement from the SLPP as to who their choice would be for Presidential Candidate or, indeed, whether they will support President Wickremesinghe, who himself has not declared his candidacy so far. A final decision on this is not expected until after the Sinhala and Tamil New Year.

Last week also saw the much-anticipated Colombo rally of the ‘New Alliance’, the latest political group to

emerge as an offshoot of the SLPP. The meeting was held in the presence of Anura Yapa, Ministers Susil Premajayantha and Nalin Fernando as well as MP Nimal Lanza and Sugeeswara Bandara, former private secretary to former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Strange presence

Bandara's presence at the meeting raised eyebrows due to that position. Bandara remained Rajapaksa's private secretary even after he left the country following the turmoil at the President's House on July 9, 2022. Bandara resigned from Rajapaksa's staff a few days ago.

The other political activity from the SLPP camp has been initiated by young Parliamentarian Namal Rajapaksa. Viewed by many as the heir apparent for the SLPP leadership, the son of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa has undertaken visits to several Buddhist temples to meet leading prelates in recent days.

This has been interpreted by many as an indication that Namal Rajapaksa is planning on a longer political journey than the elections due in 2024. His plan of action seems to tally with the idea of keeping the SLPP afloat amidst multiple defections for major elections in a few years' time.

Another meeting that was viewed with considerable interest was the meeting between former Minister Patali Champika Ranawaka and a delegation from his newly formed United Republic Front (URF) with President Wickremesinghe to present the party's programme of action for the next elections.

Ranawaka has said that he has met with several other parties as well. There had been speculation that he is attempting to position himself as a potential Presidential Candidate opposed to the Jathika Jana Balavegaya (JJB) or NPP, especially if President Wickremesinghe decides not to contest.

This however remains mere conjecture at present. Amidst all these ever-changing developments, it is the NPP that has managed to stay focused on its campaign, raising its profile and ensuring that it will provide healthy competition for the candidates emerging from the more established political parties.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 21-2-2024

Beyond Rhetoric:

Political Landscape at a Crossroads

Tissa Mihindupura

Lack of discourse leads to voters making decisions without a deep understanding of the country's challenges:

New political forces like the National People's Power (NPP) face internal ideological discord:

Urge for informed political choices based on in-depth analysis rather than surface-level promises:

The presidential election is at least seven months away from today if it is to be conducted on schedule in accordance with the Constitution. Yet the political arena is ablaze with rhetorical fireworks and ideological realignments. That is a normal phenomenon expected in the lead-up to elections in the country.

As has always been, Sri Lankan politics has been mired with rhetoric devoid of enlightened debates on the vital topics required to be dealt with substantively for the country to forge ahead. The masses get carried away by such rhetoric and cast their ballots without much forethought or understanding of the real nature of the situation and practical steps required to develop the country. The result is the lackadaisical pace of development for decades in Sri Lanka whereas the other countries in the region and elsewhere have made giant strides.

In 2019, Sri Lanka had a unique experience of electing a non-traditional politician for the first time as the Head of State. Of course, Gotabaya Rajapaksa is from a political family. But, he remained apolitical up until 2019. It proved to be a failed exercise in the end.

What is now being experienced in the country is another new phenomenon in which the National People's Power (NPP), the political force led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), is under the illusion that it can capture power at the presidential elections.

NPP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake sounds ambitious and makes pious pronouncements which, for intelligent masses, look so surface-driven. His fiery rhetoric is channeled to whip up emotions of voters who are disillusioned with traditional parties that failed to live up to their expectations. Delving into the intricacies of issues at hand reveals how the NPP, with its stark policy contrasts, tries to evade the actual debate, much to the consternation of thinking people.

Policy approaches

Whoever might win the elections, there are ground realities one cannot disregard. In fact, those are realities any party in power has to grapple with, albeit differences in policy approaches.

First, Sri Lanka is now halfway through its programme with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The total amount of Sri Lanka's EFF (Extended Fund Facility) Arrangement is about US\$3 billion as of the time of programme approval on March 20, 2023. The government has received two tranches of it at the moment. The IMF programme is linked to the restructuring of the country's external debt. The government is making headway in this regard, and most likely, the agreement will be signed soon.

What is absent on the NPP political stage is its stance on the IMF programme. Rhetorically, one can vow to scrap the programme. Of course, any future government can renegotiate it, but any deviation from the programme

will have ripple effects on the economy. The IMF programme is linked to an agreement with creditors, both bilateral and private, on the debt repayment agenda. In case of any deviation from the programme, debt restructuring has to be renegotiated in different terms, a task nearly impossible. The government had to make a great deal of effort to reach an understanding with the Paris Club of Creditors on debt restructuring while accommodating China on board on acceptable terms. The country owes an explanation from the political parties who harp on the programme to be replaced with their own.

There was a huge hue and cry made about the increase in the VAT rate, a move carried out to increase generation in keeping with the IMF guidelines. Of course, the VAT hike has had an impact on the cost of living. People are reeling under the impact of it. Still, any reduction of VAT rate means denial of revenue to the state coffers. Still, revenue is needed to run the government's affairs. What is now needed is a convincing, in-depth, yet simple analysis of the tax policy of each party for people to make informed, rational choices in politics.

Parties like the NPP grapple with ideological discord over the ground realities. It is more so for the NPP, due to the accommodation of outsiders in its expansion efforts. This influx dilutes the party's once-unified vision, giving rise to conflicting viewpoints among members and leaving observers puzzled over its true ideological moorings.

Change of mind

The best example is the NPP's latest stand on its relations with India. NPP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake and others, during the recent visit to India, engaged with India's dairy giant Amul, a cooperative that has sought to invest in Sri Lanka. Initially, the party raised objections to the planned restructuring of Sri Lanka's Milco and the National Livestock Development Board (NLDB) in partnership with Amul. After the visit, they said they were only opposed to such a deal without an open tender process but not to the involvement of Amul.

The leaders have a change of mind but it is not the case with the traditional members of the party who are thoroughbred with leftist ideology and averse to any mode of private sector involvement, particularly foreign partners. Days after the conclusion of the Indian visit of its leaders, the NPP-affiliated All Ceylon Farmers Federation led by strongman Namal Karunaratne demonstrated in Anuradhapura against what he called 'alienation of Milco and NLDB' to Amul. He even warned the prospective investor not to touch this transaction.

"This is disputed land. We warn you not to lay claim to its ownership," he said.

The political and ideological contrasts are so prominent. It is uncertain which school of thought within the party will prevail at the end. This ideological contrast is characteristic of broader disillusionment with traditional parties, perceived as riddled with corruption. The NPP's focus on anti-corruption measures resonates with the public, exploiting the failure of other parties to address this issue adequately.

As the country stands at a crossroads, the electorate demands more than empty promises and surface-level rhetoric. Substantive debate and pragmatic solutions are essential to address the country's pressing challenges. The path to progress lies not in ideological discord but in unified efforts towards sustainable development and prosperity for all.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 17-2-2024

President assigns new responsibilities for UNP rankers

Instructs Management Committee get all Parties on board:

Shiromi Abayasinghe

Party Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe has assigned new responsibilities to officials of the party on behalf of the future activities of the United National Party (UNP).

The UNP Board of Management met recently, and during that occasion, rebuilding the Party's organization affairs was assigned to UNP Chairman Vajira Abeywardena.

The process of digitalizing the party was assigned to National Organizer Sagala Ratnayake.

The responsibility of building up staff of universities and non-academic staff as well as student campaigns was given to Akila Viraj Kariyawasam.

Ravi Karunanayake was given the responsibility of gathering other parties and MPs as well as organizers, around the UNP and establishing an alliance, was assigned.

The President assigned the responsibility of building up a social media programme for the UNP to the Board of Management. President Wickremesinghe assigned Harin Fernando the responsibility of organizing the upcoming May Day rally instructed that he should get-together with the Management Committee and hold a successful rally. The President advised them to work towards gathering all Parties around the UNP and not only the Samagi Jana Balawegaya.

The President also gave instructions to make arrangements to hold a meeting in April similar to the one to be held in March with his participation in Kuliyaipitiya.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 28-2-2024

Calls grow in Maoist Centre to toughen stance against Congress

Maoist leaders criticise Nepali Congress leaders' Mahasamiti reports and a faction's Hindu state demand.

ANIL GIRI

Kathmandu, The two key ruling parties are at odds as a cabinet reshuffle and the election for National Assembly chair loom. A Standing Committee meeting of the CPN (Maoist Centre) on Tuesday took exception to some of the contents and issues that were discussed in the recently concluded Mahasamiti meeting of the Nepali Congress. The party also hardened its position against ceding the post of National Assembly chair to the Nepali Congress.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who is waiting for Nepali Congress' nod for a Cabinet reshuffle, wants to remove some ministers including those from the Congress, but no understanding has been reached among the ruling partners, according to leaders.

"In a recent meeting between our party president Sher Bahadur Deuba and Prime Minister Dahal, our party president had told the prime minister that the latter was free to decide on Cabinet reshuffle," said Min Bishwakarma, head of the publicity department of the Nepali Congress.

Deuba, in his meeting with Dahal, had reassured him not to be suspicious about the fate and future of the alliance and not to worry about the issues discussed at the Mahasamiti meeting. According to leaders of the Nepali Congress and Maoist Centre, Prime Minister Dahal wants to replace Finance Minister Prakash Sharan Mahat, but Deuba has reservations about that.

That is why no understanding has been reached on a Cabinet reshuffle, according to leaders of the two parties. Several other ministers from all five ruling partners are under scrutiny.

During the Maoist Centre's Standing Committee meeting on Tuesday, according to the Maoist spokesman Agni Sapkota, "serious discussions" were held on some of the issues raised at the recently concluded Congress Mahasamiti.

In the Mahasamiti meeting, Nepali Congress General Secretary Gagan Thapa's political paper vehemently opposed the

idea of electoral alliances and called for the party to fight the upcoming elections independently. Thapa's paper was endorsed by the Mahasamiti and has been forwarded to the party Central Working Committee for finalisation.

"Since the Nepali Congress is gradually building its position against electoral alliances, why should we cede

them the post of National Assembly chair," said a standing committee member, adding, "We told the prime minister not to be too generous towards the Nepali Congress and offer the upper house chair to the party."

Maoist leaders cite two reasons to support their claim to the post of National Assembly chair.

They argue that the Maoist Centre emerged as the single largest party in the National Assembly, so it has a natural claim over the post. Their other argument is that the party will have no representation in the Constitutional Council after 11 months if the post of National Assembly chair is given to the Nepali Congress.

As per a purported agreement in the ruling coalition, around 11 months remain for Dahal to serve as prime minister. So the Maoist Centre will have no representation in the Constitutional Council once Dahal hands over the premiership to another leader of the ruling alliance.

Some Maoist standing committee members, reportedly, also expressed concerns and reservations over the report presented at the Mahasamiti by Congress Vice-president Purna Bahadur Khadka. Khadka's report says the Maoist insurgency was unreasonable and some seen and unseen forces were responsible for undermining the 1990's constitution and derailing the progress of the country.

Maoist Centre leaders like Barshaman Pun, Janardan Shama, Haribol Gajurel, and Sunil Poudel among others criticised Khadka's report and urged the prime minister to take up the matter with the leaders of the Nepali Congress, according to participants of the meeting.

The leaders on Tuesday argued that as a member of the ruling coalition and a major party to the peace process that has yet to be concluded, it was unbecoming of the Nepali Congress to criticise the Maoist movement.

At the meeting, Prime Minister Dahal did not make any commitment regarding the appointment of upper house chair, but indicated that since the Maoist Centre is a key partner in the ruling alliance, it demands some compromise and flexibility.

"I will examine all possibilities thoroughly," Dahal said at the meeting, according to a standing committee member.

Nepali Congress has proposed its senior leader Krishna Prasad Sitaula as its candidate for upper house chair, but there is a growing sentiment in the Maoist Centre that the Congress has betrayed the Maoists in several elections including the recent National Assembly elections.

In recent days, Sitaula also had a meeting with Dahal and expressed his interest in assuming the post of National Assembly chair of the ruling coalition in the

event of a political crisis in the ruling coalition, a leader close to Sitaula said.

Earlier, after a tacit understanding among the ruling coalition partners that Sitaula would be the ideal candidate for the National Assembly chair, he had decided to contest the upper house election, the Nepali Congress leader said, adding, “Otherwise Sitaula would not have contested the elections.”

Some standing committee members told the prime minister to consider the results of last month’s National Assembly elections of Kosi Province before taking the decision.

Maoist Centre’s Champa Karki had lost the upper house seat to CPN-UML’s Rukmini Koirala. Maoist Centre has been claiming that its candidate lost due to betrayal by the Nepali Congress.

Majority of the standing committee members suggested that the party should stake claim to the upper house chair, said Sapkota.

Although some of the issues of the Congress Mahasamiti were brought up at Tuesday’s meeting, the prime minister did not respond to any of them, he said.

“The meeting will conclude tomorrow [Wednesday] where the prime minister will respond to some of the concerns,” said Sapkota.

Some members had also expressed concerns over the demand at the Congress Mahasamiti for the restoration of the Hindu state. Over 1,000 Congress Mahasamiti members had signed a petition demanding that Nepal be declared a Hindu state.

Some Maoist leaders had suggested that it would be difficult to continue the partnership with the Congress if the party veers towards regressive agendas. Although a Congress faction presented the petition calling for reinstatement of Hindu state to party chief Deuba, he dismissed the demand calling it anachronistic.

Meanwhile, Congress leader Bishwakarma told the Post that Deuba has reaffirmed to the prime minister that the Congress is committed to the current coalition in line with their past understandings. “We hope that the alliances will ultimately agree to elect none other than Sitaula to the post of upper house chair,” he said.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 27-2-2024

Would Mahato’s exit from LSP bring any substantive change in national politics?

Mahato aims to set up an ‘alternative’ political force whose goal is to establish a ‘pluralistic nation-state’.

Post Report

Kathmandu, Rajendra Mahato, a key leader of Loktantrik Samajbadi Party, quit the organisation on

Monday and announced his new campaign, Rastriya Mukti Andolan, literally the ‘national liberation movement’.

Mahato had been expressing his dissatisfaction with party chairman Mahantha Thakur but after the latter refused to heed his grievances, Mahato severed ties with the party. And so on Monday, Mahato announced that he would now work for the oppressed and marginalised communities through his new endeavour.

Arguing that the country needs another movement to emancipate the oppressed and marginalised people, Mahato called on all sections of the society, including his former party leaders and cadres, to join his movement. The Mahato-led Andolan had already protested in some areas in Kathmandu as a pilot project, bringing in general people, mostly from the Janajati and Adivasi clusters.

Mahato advocates for sub-national identity to uplift the social, economic, and political status of the oppressed and marginalised communities.

“The Madheshi people struggled for six months after the promulgation of the constitution in 2015 but we could not win,” Mahato said during the press conference held to announce his decision on Monday. “So the country needs another movement that incorporates those oppressed and marginalised communities. Hence, I call on all the stakeholders concerned to join our movement.”

After quitting the party, Mahato, along with his team members, will impart training to individuals from the marginalised communities, especially on what exactly his movement entails and aims to achieve, Keshav Jha, who has been supporting Mahato since his early days in the Janata Samajbadi Party, told the Post.

On Wednesday, the Rastriya Mukti Andolan is holding a protest in Kathmandu’s Maitighar, which has been prohibited for protests and mass meetings.

“We will continue with different kinds of protests and demonstrations for the oppressed and marginalised communities,” Jha said. “Once we establish our agendas in society, we will form a party.”

But Nepal already has several political parties, civil society organisations, and other groups that advocate for the marginalised and oppressed communities. So how will Mahato’s movement stand out from the crowd? Will it bring any substantive change or will it, like so many parties and organisations of yore, walk the same old well-trodden path?

The very existence of the Loktantrik Samajbadi Party was threatened by its “groups of chairmen”, said Brikhesh Chandra Lal, who separated from Loktantrik Samajbadi Party in February 2022. “I cannot predict what changes Mahato could bring after his separation from the party,” Lal said.

Mahato, who is 65, started his political career with the Nepal Sadbhawana Party established by the late Gajendra Narayan Singh. Mahato later went on to form the Sadbhawana Party but it could not bring about any substantive changes in the landscape of Madheshi politics. Mahato then joined hands with Thakur to form the Rastriya Janata Party, which saw a bitter power struggle between the two leaders. The party merged with Upendra Yadav's Samajbadi Party but the outfit did not last for long given the triangular power struggle between Yadav, Mahato and Thakur. Thakur and Mahato then formed the Loktantrik Samajbadi Party in August 2021.

A man with a chequered past, Mahato is an impatient, career-oriented, and desperate leader, said a leader who knows him closely. "Over time, his differences with Thakur grew because the latter refused to hand over power or commit the next

leadership of the party to Mahato," the leaders said.

While announcing the new movement on Monday, Mahato hinted that he would seek to expand his base beyond Madhesh, his stronghold. His vision paper stated that he would focus on the rights of the marginalised and oppressed people and set up an "alternative" political force whose goal is to establish a "pluralistic nation-state". The paper further said that anyone who agreed with that agenda could join the movement.

"We came to know that political elites have opted for the strategy of divide and rule," Mahato said at the press conference. "We fought for thirty years after 1990. We have now understood the mentality of the political establishment. So we have announced the new movement for the emancipation of the oppressed and marginalised people. We expect all big and small parties to join in this new movement that aims to set up a pluralistic nation-state."

Lal, Mahato's one-time party colleague who is now tying up with the Hridayesh Tripathi-led People's Progressive Party, said that people in Madhesh are looking for a dedicated leader who is committed to their agenda. "So his [Mahato's] departure doesn't trigger any shockwave or inspire any enthusiasm inside Madheshi politics," Lal said.

"Now people in Madhesh are well aware of their agenda because there is now a lot of political and social awareness inside the society. But the way one after another political parties are splitting, it will weaken the agenda of Madheshi politics."

Vijay Kant Karna, former ambassador and chairman of the Center for Social Innovation and Foreign Policy, said that Mahato's departure from the Loktantrik Samajbadi Party will weaken the agenda of Madhesh and the strength of Madhesh-based political parties.

"He will revive his old group, that's the other thing, but splitting the political parties one after another will cause fragmentation in the Madheshi movement, and weaken its agenda," Karna said.

"His departure means, Loktantrik Samajbadi Party will die out gradually. More Loktantrik Samajbadi Party leaders will join other parties like CK Raut's Janamat Party, Upendra Yadav's Janata Samajbadi Party, and other parties."

Karna added that this trend of splits and divisions will weaken the Madheshi politics and movement. "Frequent splits of political parties will cause fragmentation and division in their agenda, movement and strength," he said.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 24-2-2024

Iran gears up for elections

By Ardalan Mohammadzadeh

TEHRAN- Iran is scheduled to hold the sixth term of elections for the Assembly of Experts and the 12th term of elections for the parliament on March 1.

Earlier in February, the Constitutional Council approved 14,200 candidates for the March 1 parliamentary election.

The Constitutional Council's spokesperson, Hadi Tahan Nazif, stated that a comprehensive evaluation process resulted in the qualification of a total of 14,200 candidates for parliament, with the final week focusing on scrutinizing appeal files.

He also stated that the number of candidates for the Assembly of Experts election increased to 144 people.

Tahan Nazif emphasized that the names of these qualified candidates were promptly communicated to the Interior Minister, and the Constitutional Council concluded its evaluation on February 8.

In addition to the parliamentary candidates, Tahan Nazif addressed the ongoing evaluation of Assembly of Experts candidates, indicating that their appeals were assessed on February 7.

He assured that any changes in the results would be communicated to the candidates promptly. The Constitutional Council remains dedicated to ensuring a thorough and transparent process ahead of the upcoming elections.

Mohammadreza Shahcheraghi, deputy minister of interior for political affairs and the head of election headquarters, said around 59,000 polling stations will be opened on the day of elections and nearly 800,000 people will be involved in holding the elections.

On February 17, Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi announced that 103 parties and 20 electoral

coalitions declared their readiness for the forthcoming late winter election.

Minister Vahidi further revealed that several other coalitions are also gearing up for participation.

Vahidi commended the qualification of an impressive 15,000 candidates for the parliamentary election. He highlighted the diverse backgrounds of the candidates, noting that among them are 1,100 professors, 250 doctors, 1,700 teachers, 400 judges, and 1,700 women, showcasing the breadth of expertise and representation within the pool of qualified candidates.

On February 21, the Interior Ministry made a significant announcement regarding the upcoming parliamentary elections: as of early February 22, candidates are officially allowed to kick off their electoral campaigns.

This electoral process is slated to run until 8 am February 29.

Earlier on February 20, the Interior Ministry had unveiled the comprehensive list of political entities participating in the March 1 election.

The list comprises a total of 74 national parties, 31 provincial parties, and 21 political alliances, reflecting the diverse landscape of political representation.

Notably, there are two distinct elections on the horizon: the Assembly of Experts election, which aims to elect 88 members for an extended eight-year term, and the parliamentary election, which will determine representatives for a standard four-year term.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 27-2-2024

Strong voter turnout will safeguard Iran's national security: military

TEHRAN – The spokesman for Iran's Defense Ministry has urged the citizens to exercise their voting rights in the parliamentary elections, highlighting the crucial role of participation in shaping the nation's future.

As Iran stands on the cusp of pivotal parliamentary elections scheduled for March 1, Brigadier General Reza Talaei-Nik, in an interview with Fars news agency, stated, "The discussion surrounding electoral participation is undeniably of great importance. Elections serve as the mechanism for empowering the institutions of our country. In essence, all institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran are directly or indirectly shaped based on the people's votes."

He further highlighted the unique identity of the Iranian nation as Islamic and revolutionary, noting that living in a region at the forefront of global developments brings about national and international consequences from elections. General Talaei-Nik emphasized that beyond the immediate results of elections, a strong voter turnout would send a powerful message of cohesion and resolve to the international community.

"In the face of perceived threats to Iran by adversaries in both domestic and foreign arenas, the extent of the people's participation in elections becomes a crucial consideration across national and international domains," General Talaei-Nik noted.

The Iranian Parliament, known as the Islamic Consultative Assembly or Majlis, plays a central role in the governance structure, responsible for passing laws, approving budgets, and overseeing government policies. Almost 15,000 candidates have been approved to compete in the parliamentary elections that are held every four years. In order to secure a position as a lawmaker for a four-year term, a victorious candidate is required to obtain a minimum of 20 percent of the votes cast within their respective constituency.

Concurrently with the elections of the Islamic Consultative Majlis, the Assembly of Experts election will be held on March 1, where 144 candidates are vying for 88 seats at the body, which elects and oversees the performance of Leader of the Islamic Revolution and is in a position of authority to either appoint or dismiss Leader.

Mohammadreza Shahcheraghi, deputy minister of interior for political affairs and the head of election headquarters, said around 59,000 polling stations will be opened on the day of elections and nearly 800,000 people will be involved in the process of overseeing the elections.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 29-2-2024

Enemies afraid of electoral miracle in Iran

TEHRAN- Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei met with a number of first-time voters as well as the honorable families of martyrs on Wednesday.

During the meeting, he said a vibrant and strong participation by the Iranian nation in the elections would be a manifestation of national power, guarantee the national security, and disappoint the enemies who have their eyes on Iran, according to khamenei.ir

He noted that holding a vibrant election is one of the pillars of proper administration of the country's affairs and would pave the way for resolving the country's problems and moving the country forward.

Ayatollah Khamenei, referring to the writings of some elements of the Pahlavi regime about the sham elections before the Revolution, said: "As they have also admitted, the list of the elected candidates was already determined at the [Shah's] court and sometimes even in some foreign embassies, and the same list had to come out of the ballot boxes."

Pointing to the rule of dictatorial groups after major revolutions such as the French Revolution and the former Soviet Revolution, the Leader of the Islamic Revolution said, "Imam Khomeini (ra), with complete trust in the people and giving primacy to the ballot box, put the type government to a referendum only about 50 days after the victory of the Revolution, so that the people, as the owners of the country and the Revolution, would become the decision-makers of all important matters."

He also drew attention to the evil enemies keeping a watchful eye on "dear Iran" and Friday's elections, saying, "The U.S., the policies of most Europeans, the evil Zionists, capitalists and big companies that follow Iran's affairs closely with various motives and reasons are more than anything else afraid of the people's participation in the elections and the power of the Iranian people."

"The enemies have seen that this decisive popular power destroyed the tyrannical regime supported by the U.S. and the UK and disgraced Saddam in the imposed war despite his Western, Eastern and regional supporters," Ayatollah Khamenei remarked.

That is why, he hastened to add, elections are a manifestation of showing off the country's national power.

He called the strong participation of people in the elections a manifestation of national power, which in turn guarantees national security, asserting that "nothing will exist without national security."

"If the enemy sees a weakness in Iranians in the field of national power, it will threaten the national security from various angles," the Leader warned.

He also argued that the election of strong candidates, the formation of a strong parliament, and consequently resolving the country's problems and securing its progress are the outcomes of a strong and vibrant election.

"Political growth and increasing the analytical power of the youth during the elections are invaluable, because they lead to gaining knowledge about the enemy and its methods and actions, and as a result, gaining knowledge about the ways to confront and neutralize the conspiracies of the ill-wishers," he said.

In the final part of his speech, Ayatollah Khamenei called the Gaza issue an essential issue of the Islamic world and said: "The Gaza issue introduced Islam to the world, and it became clear that Islam and religion as a factor lead to people's power and resistance and their not surrendering in the face of all the bombings and catastrophes of the Zionists."

This issue, he went on, showed the truth of the Western culture and civilization to the world and it became clear that the politicians born from this culture are not even

willing to acknowledge that the Zionists are committing genocide against Palestinians.

He said despite their empty rhetoric, they veto UN Security Council resolutions aimed at halting the Zionist regime's crimes.

Ayatollah Khamenei also said the self-immolation of a U.S. Air Force officer in protest against the crimes of the Zionist regime was the peak of scandal and disgrace for the U.S.'s inhumane policies and the West's cruel culture".

He further added that even this person who was brought up in Western culture recognized the depth of the disgrace of this culture.

The Leader of the Islamic Revolution then expressed hopes that God would grant complete victory to Islam, Muslims and Palestine, especially Gaza.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 25-2-2024

ECP gears up to hold election for president by March 9

Amir Wasim

ISLAMABAD: Still coping with the post-poll challenges amid rigging allegations, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is now gearing up to hold the election for the office of the country's president by March 9, two days before the retirement of half of the senators after completing their six-year term, *Dawn* has learnt.

"The president will be elected by the present senators after setting up of all the four provincial assemblies," a senior PPP office-bearer said, adding that the election could take place on March 9 or 10.

The six-party alliance, set to form a coalition government at the Centre under the PML-N's Shehbaz Sharif, has already announced Asif Ali Zardari as its consensus candidate for the country's top constitutional office.

Mr Zardari previously served as the president from September 2008 to 2013 after the resignation of the military ruler Pervez Musharraf.

Article 41(4) of the Constitution says that "election to the office of president shall be held not earlier than sixty days and not later than thirty days before the expiration of the term of the president in office: Provided that, if the election cannot be held within the period aforesaid because the National Assembly is dissolved, it shall be held within thirty days of the general election to the Assembly".

Since the general elections were held on Feb 8, the presidential election is required to be conducted by March 9, just two days before the retirement of half of the 100-member Senate.

The sources said the Senate elections were also due in the first week of March, but because of the delay in the general elections of the National and provincial assemblies, the Senate elections will now be held either in the last week of March or the first week of April which means the upper house will remain dysfunctional and incomplete for some period.

According to a PPP leader, it is because of the upcoming presidential election and to ensure Mr Zardari's win that the party has stopped its two senators, Nisar Khuhro and Jam Mahtab Dahar, from taking the oath as MPAs in the Sindh Assembly.

According to the formula applied for the president's election, the vote of a senator is counted as a single vote, whereas in the Sindh Assembly, one vote will be equal to nearly four votes. In this way, Mr Zardari will get benefit in the presidential elections.

Incumbent President Dr Arif Alvi is already on an extended tenure after completing his five-year term on Sept 9 last year.

Article 44(1) of the Constitution says that the president will hold office for a term of five years from the day he assumes charge, but he continues to hold the office until a successor is chosen.

Dr Alvi is the country's fourth democratically elected president to complete the five-year term. The three presidents before Dr Alvi who completed their full terms were Chaudhary Fazal Elahi (fifth president, from 1973 to 1978), Asif Ali Zardari (11th, from 2008 to 2013), and Mamnoon Hussain (12th, from 2013 to 2018).

Therefore, Dr Alvi is the third consecutive president to have a full term and the first one to have an extended term due to an incomplete electoral college, which comprises the National Assembly, Senate and the four provincial assemblies.

The term-wise data of senators suggests that the PML-N and the PPP stand to lose a large chunk of their members — 69 per cent and 57 per cent, respectively — as they retire on March 11 after completing their terms.

But after Feb 8 polls, both the PML-N and PPP will definitely be able to add to their tally in the Senate. The PTI, however, will be at a definite disadvantage if it fails to conduct the intra-party elections before the Senate polls, and it may have to depend on the SIC to get representation in the upper house of the parliament.

Up until now, the total strength of the Senate has been 100, including 23 members each from the four federating units and four each from erstwhile Fata and Islamabad.

The 23 seats allocated to a province comprise 14 general seats, four reserved for women, four for technocrats and one for a minority member.

This time around, though, only 96 members will grace the chamber as the representation of the erstwhile tribal areas will end following their merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa under the 25th Constitutional Amendment.

This means that the upcoming elections to the Senate will elect 48 new senators — 11 each from all four provinces on general and technocrats' seats, two from Islamabad and two minority members from Punjab and Sindh.

At present, the house has 97 members due to the death of PML-N's Rana Maqbool Ahmed and the resignations of PTI's Shaukat Tarin and Anwaarul Haq Kakar of the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) after assuming the office of the caretaker prime minister.

The term of a senator is six years, but half of them retire every three years, and elections are held for new members.

More notifications

Meanwhile, the ECP on Saturday issued the notification of two more candidates for the reserved seats for women in the National Assembly from KP. According to the notification, the ECP has declared Shaista Khan of the PML-N and Shahida Akhtar Ali of the JUI-F as the returned candidates on the reserved seats for the National Assembly from KP.

The ECP has so far put on hold the notifications on eight reserved seats for women in the National Assembly from KP and 21 out of a total 26 reserved seats for women in the KP Assembly, stating that "the decision is pending before the commission" on the issue of PTI-backed candidates joining the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC).

In its breakdown of women's seats being awarded to parties in the national and KP assemblies, the ECP has listed all PTI-backed independents as members of the SIC. However, the column where the number of seats allocated to them should be mentioned reads: "Matter is pending before the commission".

Of the 60 reserved seats for women in the National Assembly, the ECP has now issued notifications on 40 seats, whereas out of the 10 reserved seats for non-Muslims, it has issued notifications for seven candidates.

The Election Commission has notified 20 winners out of the 32 National Assembly seats reserved for women from Punjab, all 14 from Sindh, and all four from Balochistan.

THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE, ISLAMABAD 20-2-2024

Stuck in the dead end post-election

A majority of the people voted against the status quo, but the results were manipulated

Dr Moonis Ahmar

For the third time in its political history, Pakistan finds itself stuck in a dead end after a general election. The first time the country came to this pass was after the December 1970 general election. The outcome of the vote triggered a critical crisis as the stakeholders reached a dead end, ultimately resulting in the country breaking up into two. Then again, the results from the March 1977 general election triggered a large-scale agitation against alleged rigging in the polling, leading to the imposition of what turned out to be the country's longest martial law.

And now the outcome of the February 2024 general election has resulted in a critical impasse. PTI and several other political parties are alleging large-scale rigging and fraud in the compilation of results through what they call doctored forms 45. No single party got a simple majority in the election and the country seems to have hit a dead end despite the PPP's announcement on February 13 that it will support the PML-N candidate for Prime Minister but will not be a part of the federal cabinet.

A majority of the people voted against the status quo, but the results were manipulated to turn the victory of the PTI-backed independent candidates into a defeat. The protesting candidates and their supporters, particularly in Punjab and Karachi, are now moving the Election Commission and higher courts against alleged rigging. But, one wonders how the PTI candidates will get relief from the same authority, the Election Commission, which they allege are responsible for their woes. In the meantime, high courts in Punjab and Sindh have dismissed the petitions of the PTI-backed candidates and suggested to them to approach the Election Commission to have their pleas heard. It is thus highly likely that the issue of rigging will linger on before election tribunals, as was the case in the 2013 general election when the PTI had alleged rigging in at least 35 National Assembly constituencies.

The situation this time may be different because the PTI-backed candidates claim that they have original forms 45, according to which they have won 180 National Assembly seats, but the Election Commission manipulated final results in forms 47. Still the situation is not too favourable for PTI. It's because while the petitions will remain pending with the election tribunals, the PML-N, with the PPP and MQM-P backing, will deny PTI the opportunity to form government at the Centre. A single largest bloc in the National Assembly, the PTI-backed candidates may form a strong opposition in the lower house, but only to give rise to

political uncertainty which will, in turn, further sink an economy that is already struggling to find its feet. The PPP, by supporting a PML-N government without accepting any ministries, will augment the vulnerability of the Prime Minister. If the PPP manages to get the coveted positions of President, Speaker National Assembly and Chairman Senate, without joining the federal cabinet, it can any time withdraw its support and bring down the PML-N government.

While such a government would already be fragile, the PTI is understood to keep exerting pressure both in the parliament and outside, rendering the government unable to perform. The PPP would then be in a good bargaining position to seek more and more concessions from the PML-N without shouldering any responsibilities.

The emerging situation needs to be analysed from three angles.

First, the legitimacy of the potential PML-N government will be at stake. As per the PTI's claim that is backed by anecdotal evidences, a majority of the PML-N candidates for national and provincial assemblies lost the elections but were declared victorious through fraudulent result compilation. Not just the PML-N, the credibility of the PPP and MQM-P will remain in question as the PTI, JI, JUI and GDA are up in arms against the victory of these parties, alleging that it is a result of political engineering orchestrated by the election commission at the behest of the powers-that-be. Even if the PML-N manages to form government with the help of the PPP and MQM-P, the ensuing legal battles against the theft of mandate will enhance political chaos and destabilise the government.

Second, if Pakistan has entered a dead end because of alleged large-scale rigging, it is a moment of truth for the undemocratic forces that have long held sway. While the price of a predictable political chaos and economic crisis will be paid by the country, the powers-that-be will not be able to escape responsibility either in case the state defaults on its foreign obligations. Pakistan has to pay back around 50 billion dollars to its lenders in one and half years from now — something that will become more and more difficult in the absence of political stability in the country. There are other economic challenges too like falling economic growth rate, depleting foreign exchange reserves and dwindling exports. Whosoever is in power will have to swallow the bitter pill of economic erosion, crisis in governance, absence of rule of law, environmental threats and growing human security challenges.

Finally, the dead-end situation can only be dealt with by respecting the verdict of the people in general election and focusing on dealing with issues that threaten the very survival of the State of Pakistan.

Unfortunately, the only focus of the stakeholders is on how to maintain power grab without addressing the real issues facing the 250 million people of Pakistan. Amid this lack of realisation on professionally and judiciously managing the prevailing crisis, which has augmented after the 2024 general election, the outcome will be an economic catastrophe in the form of a financial default; hyper-inflation and further falling in the economic growth rate. Lust for power and corruption is unlikely to provide escape from the dead end we have hit.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 21-2-2024

Zardari to be president, Shehbaz PM as coalition govt deal finally struck

Bilawal announced that Shehbaz Sharif will be Prime Minister and Asif Ali Zardari will be President for the next five-year term

By Asim Yasin

ISLAMABAD: In a breakthrough on Tuesday night after marathon meetings, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) finally secured a power-sharing agreement for a coalition government with Shehbaz Sharif as prime minister and Asif Ali Zardari as president for next five years. However, sources claim, the PPP will not be a part of the federal cabinet either in the first phase or in the second.

PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, former President Asif Ali Zardari, PML-N President and PMLN President Shehbaz Sharif announced the long-awaited agreement at a press conference here.

Bilawal announced that Shehbaz Sharif will be Prime Minister and Asif Ali Zardari will be President for the next five-year term.

Bilawal said the coalition has enough numbers to form the government. "The party which is present in the name of the Sunni Itehad Council (SIC) does not have the required numbers," he said.

He said the PMLN-PPP coalition is going to form the government with Shehbaz Sharif as the prime minister. Praying for the success of Pakistan, he said, "We are thankful to the PML-N for supporting PPP's candidate Asif Ali Zardari who will be the joint candidate for president."

Addressing next, PM's nominee Shehbaz Sharif said that SIC does not have the required strength. "I am pleased to announce that the PPP and PML-N have sufficient numbers to form the government, adding they will continue (government) from where it was left.

Expressing gratitude to Asif Zardari, Bilawal and PMLN Quaid Nawaz Sharif, Shehbaz said the alliance will elect Asif Zardari as president for the next five years, adding, "I am also thankful to other allied parties

MQM and PMLQ for their support as well as the PPP, and PMLN committees."

He said the alliance has to revive the economy, fight against terrorism, and return the country to the path to prosperity. He said, "We have to eliminate the debt burden. This alliance brings together the young and the seasoned who will steer the country out of crisis." He said the PPP had not demanded cabinet positions in Punjab.

Former President Asif Ali Zardari said their struggle is for Pakistan and to ensure prosperity for future generations.

To a question, Shehbaz Sharif said the PPP did not ask for any posts or ministries. "As far as the issue of constitutional offices is concerned, we will settle them with consultations and consensus." To a question regarding the 16-month experience of the PDM government, Shehbaz Sharif said they managed to avert the hovering threat of default.

Bilawal said, "Compared to the past, we have announced the coalition and made decisions with consensus very quickly as compared to the previous tenures." He also expressed the hope that the news of the PPP-PML-N coalition government will elicit a positive response from the markets.

When asked who would be the Speaker National Assembly and Chairman Senate, Bilawal said, "We have reached a breakthrough but will announce the offices later on as the people were not interested in these positions." he said, adding they want the government formation process to complete.

To a question regarding PML-N leader Ishaq Dar's nomination as Senate chairman, Bilawal replied that decisions were taken in the meetings, but they would be announced separately by each party. The leadership of both parties parried reply to the question whether the PPP would be part of the cabinet or not. However, the sources told The News that the PPP will not become part of the federal cabinet either in the first phase or in the second.

According to sources, earlier in a Tuesday night meeting between PML-N President Shehbaz Sharif and Chairman PPP Bilawal Bhutto Zardari at the residence of Senator Ishaq Dar, it was decided that the PPP will take the posts of the president, governors of Punjab and KP. Sources said the PMLN would nominate the governors of Sindh and Balochistan. It was also decided that the PPP and PML-N will have a coalition government in Balochistan while PPP will nominate its chief Minister.

The sources said the Chairman Senate will also be from the PPP while the Deputy Chairman Senate will be given to the PML-N. Sources said the Speaker of the National Assembly will be from the PML-N and PPP will have the Deputy Speaker.

Against the bonhomie earlier in the day, Bilawal saw a stalemate in the talks in the formation of the government. He said the PPP is steadfast in its philosophy and if the other side is not ready to change its stance, a dangerous stalemate is expected which will not be in the best interests of democracy, economy, federation and political stability.

Talking to reporters outside the premises of the Supreme Court after attending the hearing of the presidential reference on the case of Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the PPP Chairman said, "If I have to give a vote to the PML-N, I will do it on my terms ... I will not give it on the N League's," he said.

Bilawal attributed the delay in forming the government to the "non-seriousness of the dialogue committee". He said that this delay was not causing him any harm but was causing harm to democracy in the country. "The faster this is resolved, the better it is for stability and the incoming government," he said. Bilawal said that the PPP was "in no hurry" and was sticking its stance, adding that it would not budge from its stance. "If someone else wants to change their stance, there can be progress. If they are not ready to change it, I foresee a dangerous stalemate," Bilawal said.

To a question about bargaining with the establishment for power, Bilawal reacted sharply, "You accuse me in front of local and international media without giving any proof. Now we are standing in front of the court. Tell me if you have any proof."

"If Maulana or anyone else says this, then ask them but before accusing me, show evidence, if I meet anyone.....Was I talking about democracy and the constitution or was I talking about myself." "Journalists should present evidence before levelling any allegation against me," Bilawal Bhutto Zardari said.

On the issue of talks with the PML-N on the formation of the government, Bilawal said the people are so aware that they did not give a mandate to any single party, which gives a message that they do not want a single party to face the challenges alone. He said the people are saying that the parties should get together, and this is known as 'compromise' in politics.

The PPP chairman said that he hopes that the justice which the daughter of Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto could not get will be provided to his grandson. Bilawal said that one remedy is the judicial reference but other avenues are also available. He said if there is no time limit for those aggrieved by murder to file a case, then an FIR against the conspirators too can be filed.

Bilawal said the chief justice has said in the hearing that the blot on the other institutions will also be washed through this opportunity.

He said that he was impressed by the intellectual calibre of the judges as they are looking at the case not only in legal terms with regard to law but also history, and the facts and figures are at their fingertips

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 22-2-2024

CPC issues revised regulations on disciplinary inspections

BEIJING, Feb. 21 (Xinhua) -- The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has released the revised regulations on the Party's disciplinary inspections.

Based on the Party Constitution and the achievements made in the theoretical, practical and institutional innovation of the inspection work in the new era, the revised regulations further improve the institutions, mechanisms and responsibility system for disciplinary inspections, according to a circular issued by the CPC Central Committee.

The regulations hold significant importance in upholding and strengthening the CPC Central Committee's centralized and unified leadership over the Party's inspection work, as well as promoting the high-quality development of the inspections, the circular read, asking Party committees and groups at all levels to take studying and implementing the regulations as an important political task.

The regulations urge efforts to conduct concrete, targeted and regular discipline inspections, and stipulate the principles, leadership system, working mechanism, primary responsibilities, procedures, methods and powers of discipline inspection work.

Responsibilities for the rectification of any issues discovered in the course of inspection work should be clearly defined, the rectification mechanism should be improved, and the results of inspection tours must be put to good use comprehensively so that both the symptoms and root causes of any problems are addressed, per the regulations.

They also include corresponding provisions to strengthen coordination between discipline inspection and other forms of supervision to form a synergy of supervision.

While implementing the regulations, all localities and government departments are encouraged to report important information and suggestions to the Party Central Committee in a timely manner.

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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 21-2-2024

Outlook for Indian economy appears bright, 7% GDP growth likely in FY'25: FinMin report

ENS Economic Bureau

A healthy Rabi harvest, sustained manufacturing profitability, resilience in services along with an expected improvement in household consumption and private capex cycle are seen supporting economic activity in the coming financial year 2024-25 and the outlook for the Indian economy appears bright, the Finance Ministry said Tuesday. However, headwinds from geopolitical tensions such as supply chain disruptions and higher logistics costs, volatility in international financial markets, and geoeconomic fragmentation need watching, the ministry said in its monthly economic review for January.

Three successive years of high growth show the resilience of the Indian economy and the bedrock of high growth is strong private consumption. Investment is consolidating in the economy as high public capex crowds in private investment, which is beginning to set up additional plants and acquiring new machinery to address rising capacity utilisation, the report said.

During the current financial year, the Indian economy is estimated to grow at 7.3 per cent. This would be the third year in the row when the GDP would grow in excess of 7 per cent. The Reserve Bank of India has forecast India's GDP growth for FY25 to be 7 per cent. Many global agencies have revised India's growth projection upwards, the report said.

This reflects the resilience of the Indian economy to sustain its growth path amidst ongoing geopolitical headwinds, it said, adding, the measures announced in the Interim Union Budget FY25 are expected to play a pivotal role in supporting India's growth journey ahead.

Listing the tailwinds for the next financial year, the ministry said prospects of healthy Rabi harvesting, sustained manufacturing profitability and underlying service resilience are expected to support economic activity in FY25. On the demand side, household consumption is expected to improve, while prospects of fixed investment remain bright owing to an upturn in the private capex cycle, improved business sentiments, healthy balance sheets of banks and corporates, and the government's continued thrust on capital expenditure, it said.

However, headwinds from geopolitical tensions, volatility in international financial markets, and geoeconomic fragmentation need watching, it said. Global slowdown, especially in India's major trading partners, has led to a slowdown in demand for India's merchandise exports. Also, there has been a decline in the overall value of imports due to a fall in international

commodity prices, which spiked after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This has led to a narrowing of India's merchandise trade deficit in the first ten months of FY24, it said.

"Downside risks to trade include a spike in new commodity prices from geopolitical shocks, including continued attacks in the Red Sea and supply disruptions or more persistent underlying inflation in the developed world, which could extend tight monetary conditions," it said, adding that it could impact the expected recovery in global demand, thereby affecting the prospects for India's exports.

Lower input prices and overall inflation can influence output growth positively, which in turn can further improve the prospects for exports. Given persisting uncertainties for global output and trade growth, finding ways to enhance the competitiveness and attractiveness of India's exports is both urgent and important, it said.

On inflation, it said, pressure has moderated in January 2024 due to a fall in food as well as core inflation. The recent measures announced by the government to control food prices are likely to reduce inflation further, it said. The expectations of the fading away of El Nino and the forecast of a normal monsoon bodes well for a better-than-normal kharif sowing, it said.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 23-2-2024

Economy to grow by 6.5% in FY25: India Ratings

ENS Economic Bureau

The Indian economy is likely to grow by 6.5 per cent in the financial year 2024-25, India Ratings and Research said in its macroeconomic outlook released Thursday. The estimate, lower than the 7 per cent growth forecast of the Reserve Bank of India, is seen coming on the back of sustained government capex, healthy corporate performance, continued softness in global commodity prices and prospect of a new private corporate capex cycle.

In FY24, the National Statistical Office has projected India's economy to grow at 7.3 per cent.

"Private corporate sector investments have been down and out for nearly a decade. But when we look at lead indicators, all of them are indicating that at the current juncture the private corporate sector is once again becoming more bullish about investments. It may or may not be happening on the ground in the way we would like it to, but some flavour of that has already started becoming clearer at least in terms of intentions and the way they (corporates) are now approaching banks to finance their projects," Sunil Kumar Sinha, Principal Economist, India Ratings said.

According To India Ratings, the private sector raised `3.56 lakh crore to fund 982 projects in FY23, which is substantially higher than `1.98 lakh crore raised to fund 791 projects in FY22.

However, there are risks to aggregate demand as it is largely driven by government capex, it said. "Prevailing consumption demand is still skewed in favour of the goods and services consumed by the households belonging to the upper 50 per cent of the income bracket," it said. India Ratings expects private final consumption expenditure to grow by 6.1 percent in 2024-25, up from 4.4 percent in 2023-24.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 22-2-2024

Govt okays changes in space Foreign Direct Investment policy

Up to 100% investment for making satellite parts

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, The Union Cabinet on Wednesday eased Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) norms in the space sector by allowing up to 100 per cent overseas investment under the automatic route in certain activities like making components for satellites.

The proposed reforms prescribe liberalised entry route and provide clarity for FDI in making satellites, launch vehicles and associated systems or subsystems, creation of spaceports for launching and receiving spacecraft and manufacturing of space-related components and systems.

Presently, FDI in the space sector is allowed up to 100 per cent in the area of satellite establishment and operations through government route only.

By changing the current policy, the government has allowed up to 74 per cent FDI under automatic route in satellites-manufacturing and operation, satellite data products, and ground and user segments. Beyond this limit, government approval will be required in these areas for FDI. Up to 49 per cent FDI is allowed through the automatic route for launch vehicles and associated systems or subsystems, creation of spaceports for launching and receiving spacecraft. Beyond 49 per cent, FDI in these activities would require government approval.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 27-2-2024

Trade diplomacy: Govt depts red-flag high duties to curb China imports, seek nuance in strategy

Ravi Dutta Mishra, Anil Sasi

MULTIPLE WINGS IN the government have started to red-flag the Centre's moves to progressively hike

customs duties, especially the more recent offensive targeted at imports of Chinese components and inputs. A section within the government is in favour of a more nuanced approach in using tariffs as a diplomatic tool, failing which there is a possibility of the gains of India's manufacturing-focused thrust that include schemes such as Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) being squandered away.

What cannot be missed is that China still accounts for 14 per cent of India's imports with not just inputs for the domestic industry in sectors ranging from electronics to pharmaceuticals and textiles to leather, but also capital goods, being sourced from China. This, coupled with the fact that average tariffs in India have jumped to 18.1 per cent in 2022 from 13 per cent eight years ago in 2014, has made India uncompetitive vis-a-vis countries such as Vietnam, Thailand and Mexico.

In fact, much of the protests from ministries have come after the industry warned of the detrimental impact of higher tariffs being used as a protectionism tool. The blockade targeting Chinese imports, which gained traction across Central ministries and departments in the aftermath of the Galwan border clash since 2020, is now seen to be impacting sectors such as electronics and pharmaceuticals. The roadblocks to imports in these sectors is leading to either a loss of domestic output or simply a loss of competitive advantage for Indian manufacturing.

After lobby groups representing Apple Inc. and other cell phone manufacturers said India's high tariffs pose a disincentive to de-risking supply chains beyond China. As a result, countries such as Vietnam, Thailand and Mexico are offering lower tariffs on components to grab the space vacated by China.

Earlier this year, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) relayed concerns about high production cost due to high tariffs to the Finance Ministry. MeitY had pushed for a lowering of duties of about 20 per cent on parts including circuit boards, chargers and fully assembled phones, by at least 5 percentage points. This was partly agreed to and the government reduced duty on several IT goods ahead of the Interim Budget 2024.

Moreover, to check cheap quality imports from China, India imposed Quality Control Orders (QCOs) that restrict MSMEs from getting necessary input material.

Why India Inc wants lower duty?

WHILE India Inc has mostly been at the forefront of pushing for protectionist measures including tariff and non-tariff barriers, it is the industry itself which wants the government to reduce duties on imports of capital goods and key inputs across sectors.

"Globally there is no country where tariffs are so high (as in India). Our tariffs are higher than countries in South East Asia and even Africa. If one were to impose

tariffs for a security reason, it is different. (For that there are safeguard measures of the Directorate General of Trade Remedies (DGTR). We are currently negotiating FTAs with developed countries which have maximum tariffs at 60 per cent... that too on products such as tobacco. Our highest tariffs go up to 150 per cent. Of course, we are different from developed nations and we need to reduce tariffs in a calibrated manner. Commerce will have to work on it," a government official involved in the tariff negotiations said on condition of anonymity.

"All imports are not bad. Our economy will not grow if we start blocking imports. When Galwan (conflict) happened, there was no official order but all imports from China were stuck. This resulted in our own offices being filled with requests from domestic industry including textiles and leather. Each and every input comes from China. They missed (export) orders and faced a penalty. Protectionism is not nationalism. It only brings inefficiency. You can give some time to your industry but you cannot give protection till eternity," the official said.

India accounts for negligible share in China's total trade, but significantly depends on Chinese imports in key sectors including pharmaceuticals and electronics. Official data shows that India is home to barely 3 per cent of Chinese exports. But China is one of India's biggest import sources, making up for 14 per cent of India's total imports, especially with regard to intermediate goods and capital goods. This dependency has left India vulnerable to supply chain disruption.

"If you look at the trade data in the last 10 years... we have not gained in our FTAs with Korea and Japan. Our textile and leather industry sought access in Japan and Korea but they gained more and our exports remained flat. So, from the perspective of development economics, it makes sense to gradually decrease duties and integrate better with global markets and then negotiate FTAs," a second government official said on condition of anonymity.

An internal study by industry lobby group India Cellular and Electronics Association (ICEA) that analysed input tariffs across five countries — China, Thailand, Vietnam, Mexico and India — has noted that India has the highest tariffs on inputs in the electronic segment. The high tariffs, it said, is impacting competitiveness and that the industry is seeking reduction of tariffs to levels in Vietnam, which offers lower tariffs for about 98 per cent tariff lines compared with India, while Thailand offers lower tariffs for over 90 per cent of goods.

An industry player from the electrical industry talked of the futility of slapping import duties on items where India has a natural advantage, including aluminium, polymers and petrochemicals. While industry does not need higher duty as a safeguard, the imposition of tariff

walls lead domestic producers to hike prices to the extent of the duty, thereby impacting overall competitiveness of the industry.

Also, these hikes in import duties render India's exports uncompetitive, given that a significant portion of exports are import-intensive. More importantly, trade barriers end up promoting inefficiencies in domestic manufacturing, at the cost of hurting consumers.

Tariff hikes have been undertaken by the NDA government multiple times covering well over 500 major item categories since 2016, marking a "calibrated departure" from the policy of reducing import duty that has been followed by successive governments over the last two decades.

The Ministry of Commerce denies these duty increases are "protectionist" in nature. An official said India's stance on hiking tariffs mirrored the broader trend globally, and that New Delhi had shown a renewed interest in signing bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) over the last 24 months.

While both statements have an element of truth, India's tariff hikes clearly started well before the largely post-pandemic mood of protectionism in the western world kicked in. Also, while India is currently negotiating a record number of bilateral trade deals, it has chosen to stay out of important mega regional trading arrangements, including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

Analysts caution that in some cases where customs duty hikes have been proposed, duties are close to or have effectively crossed the WTO-mandated "bound rates". These are the customs duty rates that a country commits to all other members under the MFN principle, and breaching these rates could effectively put a country at risk of being branded as "protectionist" as per WTO norms that prohibit discrimination by use of tariffs by its 164 members

There is also a clash between two contrasting viewpoints within the government — of India's domestic market being a bargaining chip and high tariff walls forcing foreign companies to manufacture here to take advantage of India's market size, as against the other point of view that domestic cost competitiveness is important for export competitiveness and that can only happen with lower tariffs.

Some of the tariff hikes initiated over the last two years have come despite protests from the industry and even within sections of the government itself. In February 2020, Indian toy traders, retailers, wholesalers, and manufacturers came together to form an umbrella body, the All India Toys Federation, to protest the hike of import duty on toys in that year's budget. Earlier too, the withdrawal of concessional customs duties on 76 specified drugs in January 2016 had to be partly withdrawn after the Ministry of Health cited an adverse

impact on the prices and availability of these drugs. The implementation of the duty hike on solar panels from September 2017 was opposed by both the New and Renewable Energy Ministry and solar project developers. The withdrawal of the exemption from basic customs duty on 'cashew nuts in shell' in Budget 2016-17 resulted in representations from various trade and industry associations seeking a withdrawal of the imposition of the duty of 5 per cent on cashew nuts in the shell.

The official argument is that these calibrated changes in duty rates "will help the domestic industry in capacity creation", "providing a level playing field", "easing the raw material supply side constraints" and "enhancing ease of doing business".

But analysts who counter this view say that the nearly eight years of protectionism have not pushed up the share of manufacturing in India's GDP — levels of around 15 per cent have been steady for well over a decade, despite multiple sops that include unprecedented tax breaks.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 16-2-2024

India, Nepal sign pact to integrate UPI, NPI

PTI

Mumbai: State-owned Central banks of India and Nepal on Thursday signed terms of reference for the integration of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and National Payments Interface (NPI). The Reserve Bank of India and Nepal Rastra Bank signed the terms of reference. The formal launch of the commencement of operations will be done at a later date, the Reserve Bank said in a statement.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 21-2-2024

Indo-Bangla inland waterways connectivity terminal launched in Tripura's Srimantapur

Debraj Deb

A new inland waterway terminal and a permanent jetty at the Indo-Bangla inland waterway protocol route between Sonamura and Daudkandi was inaugurated at Srimantapur in Tripura's Sepahijala district on Tuesday, nearly four years after the route was started.

Chief Minister Manik Saha, who joined the inaugural event via videoconferencing, said the new infrastructure would help to strengthen the trade and economic relations between India and Bangladesh. "Import and export of commodities between both the countries through waterways would be easier. Besides, the tourist footfall will also increase and also enhance scope of

employment," he said. Tourism Minister Sushanta Chowdhury said that under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, emphasis had been laid on connecting the Northeast with different states and India's neighbours through roadways, waterways, railways and airways.

"The prime minister has given us the HIRA model (Highways, I-ways, Railways and Airways). Currently, we have six highways and a few more will come up. We have been connected with different places of the country through railways. We had never thought that the Rajdhani Express would run here. We had never dreamt of waterways connectivity to Bangladesh," he said.

Sarbananda Sonowal, Union minister for ports, shipping and waterways, who virtually joined from Guwahati, unveiled different projects worth Rs 308 crore including upgraded terminals at Karimganj and Badarpur, a passenger-cargo terminal at Bogibeel near Dibrugarh in Assam and the inland water transport terminal at Sonamura. In July 2020, Tripura readied a floating jetty on the Gomati river in Sonamura, 60 km from Agartala, as part of the Indo-Bangla international inland waterways connectivity project. The jetty, which connects Sonamura with Daudkandi of Bangladesh, was included in the list of routes part of an Indo-Bangladesh protocol signed between the India's high commissioner to Bangladesh, Riva Ganguly Das, and Bangladesh's shipping secretary, Md Mezbah Uddin Chowdhury, in Dhaka in May 2020.

Small boats and ferries capable of carrying 50 ton goods were scheduled to start moving through this route to Bangladesh soon. While some boats did move and continue to move, the authorities are trying to boost the navigability of the rain-fed river, including with plans for dredging the Gomati riverbed to make way for small ships and boats from Sonamura till Bangladesh's Ashuganj river port, which is only 60 km away, during the winters.

A permanent jetty was proposed at the time as it was found necessary for full-fledged operations even though the Gomati has sufficient water for the movement of boats and small ships during the monsoon. India has 20 integrated checkpoints, half of which are on the eastern boundary with Bangladesh. Tripura's 856-km-long border with Bangladesh is the second-longest with that country, after West Bengal's 2,216.7-km international boundary.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 21-2-2024

Indian team flies to London to seal FTA before poll code kicks in

Ravi Dutta Mishra

An Indian delegation headed by Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal left for London Tuesday in a final effort

to seal the India-UK free trade agreement (FTA) before the dates for the 2024 general elections are announced.

This comes four days after the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) reviewed the progress of the India-UK FTA talks being negotiated for the last two years.

The visit is crucial as dates for the general elections are expected to be announced in less than a month, triggering the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) which will restrict the Union government's ability to announce the deal.

Efforts to close the deal this month also assumes significance because the UK is also headed to elections by the end of the year. Hectic parleys have been going on — a UK delegation visited India in January.

“The signing of the India-UK FTA is still possible and the Commerce Secretary and other negotiators are headed for the UK. If substantial conclusion of the FTA is done, it can be announced and there are unlikely to be any amendments as the NDA government is expected to come back to power again,” a government official said.

Earlier, The Indian Express, quoting a UK official, had reported that the deal can be signed in the next three weeks and that India needs to open up more as it is a high tariff country and the UK already is very open.

The India-UK FTA will uld be the first full fledged FTA with a developed country which could accrue significant benefits in the service sector and several labour intensive sectors such as textile and leather industry.

It is crucial for New Delhi to sign the free trade agreement as it has passed on regional trade agreements such as the China led-Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and has also not decided to join the US led-Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF's) trade pillar.

Meanwhile, Indian competitors such as Vietnam and other South Asian countries are inserting themselves in the global supply chain with multiple FTAs and regional trade deals. Post-pandemic Vietnam has been able to attract more investments that are moving away from China.

The political atmosphere in the UK remains heated with an increasing anti-immigrants stance. India has, however, sought access for its service sector workforce under the FTA. The UK's economy dipped into a recession amid high interest rates and spending cutbacks.

India's tariff regime has been a concern for trade partners as India has one of the highest import tax rates in the world. While the average tariff on goods imported from India into the UK is 4.2 per cent, the average tariff in India on goods imported from the UK is 14.6 per cent.

While the UK has asked India to reduce the duty on cars and whisky among other items, India has sought better access for its service sector workforce in the UK. Negotiations on cars and whisky have been contentious as the Indian industry has been seeking greater access into the UK market.

Indian whisky manufacturers have said the UK should ease its three year maturation rule, which acts as a barrier, and New Delhi is also seeking duty concessions in the auto sector, particularly in the EV segment.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 16-2-2024

GDP grows 6.07pc in Jul-Sept quarter

Md Asaduz Zaman

Bangladesh's economy grew at 6.07 percent in July-September of the current fiscal year, the first time the government has published the quarterly growth figure of gross domestic product (GDP).

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the national statistical agency, released the quarterly GDP data in line with the condition of the International Monetary Fund's \$4.7 billion loan programme. The first quarter's expansion was, in fact, a decline by 2.69 percentage points from the 8.76 percent growth recorded in July-September of 2022-23. It was 5.16 percent in the first quarter of 2021-22. The agriculture sector witnessed a growth of 0.84 percent in July-September while it was 2.07 percent in the same period of FY23. The service sector's growth fell to 3.96 percent from 12.87 percent while the industrial sector grew 9.67 percent from 7.17 percent.

“The growth slowdown is the reflection of the country's macroeconomic situation,” said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh.

“The country has been persistently facing the dollar crisis and an elevated inflationary pressure for a long time.” About the agricultural sector's slowdown, the economist said the seasonal factor has contributed to this situation as agricultural production has been hampered severely.

He pointed out lower production of Aman paddy, potatoes, onion and other vegetables.

“As a result, there is a shortage of supply.”

When asked about the performance of the industrial sector, Mansur said exports did not increase as expected. Other manufacturing sectors also saw the same situation.

The economy grew 6.03 percent in the last financial year.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 18-2-2024

GDP growth slowed to 13yr low in FY23, excluding pandemic period

Rejaul Karim Byron

Bangladesh's gross domestic product grew 5.78 percent in the last financial year, one of the slowest paces of expansion in 13 years, as consumption nosedived, according to the final figures published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

A provisional estimate released in May last year showed that the economy expanded by 6.03 percent in 2022-23, down from 7.1 percent in 2021-22.

FY23's GDP growth was one of the slowest since 2011-12, with the 3.42 percent posted in 2019-20 being the lowest, driven by the devastating effect of the coronavirus pandemic when many countries, in fact, saw contraction.

Compared to the provisional numbers, the growth rate in the agriculture and industrial sectors increased in the final estimate in FY23, while it decreased in the service sector.

The service sector's growth dropped 47 basis points to 5.37 percent in the last financial year that ended in June compared to the interim estimation. It was 6.26 percent in FY22.

Agriculture GDP was up 76 basis points to 3.37 percent.

The industrial sector GDP rose 19 basis points to 8.37 percent in FY23. It was 9.86 percent in the final estimate a year ago.

Owing to the lingering impacts of the coronavirus pandemic and the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, Bangladesh's economy faced one of the worst periods in FY23, with foreign currency reserves plummeting, the taka losing its value sharply, and inflation surging to record levels.

Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office, said the service sector saw slower growth mainly because of people's reduced purchasing power.

"On the one hand, the prices of essentials increased. On the other hand, wages did not go up. As a result, people had to cut back on their non-essential expenditures."

Activities in the transport sector and the trade sector also slowed down.

According to the BBS, the growth in wholesale and retail trades, which contribute 15.26 percent to the GDP, dropped 27 basis points to 6.38 percent. It was 8.46 percent in FY22.

The transport and storage sector, which accounted for 7.29 percent of the GDP, witnessed 50 basis points decline to 5.49 percent in the final estimate.

The service sector's performance was impacted by the slowdown in real estate, financial and insurance activities, accommodation, and food service activities.

On Thursday, the BBS, for the first time, published its quarterly report on GDP and released a report on the first quarter of the current fiscal year.

It showed the economy grew at 6.07 percent in July-September of 2023-24.

The agriculture sector witnessed an expansion of 0.84 percent while it was 2.07 percent in the same period of FY23.

The service sector's growth fell to 3.96 percent from 12.87 percent while the industrial sector grew by 9.67 percent against 7.17 percent a year earlier.

Hussain said the country has been experiencing higher inflation for the past two years. "This affected the service sector's growth."

In Bangladesh, inflation has stayed at an elevated level since May 2022.

a lot of diversity while Bangladesh's was highly concentrated on readymade garments.

An analysis of the export data shows that 82-85 percent of Bangladesh's total exports are of garment items.

Around 1984 to 1985, Bangladesh and Vietnam had similar export concentrations and an export size of around \$1.5 billion. While Bangladesh's export size has grown to \$55 billion, Vietnam's has ballooned to close to \$300 billion and they have diversified their export basket.

"Bangladesh's exports have increased, but are almost one-fifth of Vietnam's exports," Raihan said.

He said that Bangladesh's graduation from least developed country (LDC) status would create many opportunities, but pragmatic, large-scale policy reforms would be needed to make the most of it.

For export readiness after LDC graduation, he suggested the harmonisation of the monetary policy and fiscal policy, increasing regulatory efficiency and quality, reducing non-performing loans, and ensuring long-term financing from the capital market.

"Moreover, we are lagging in trade logistics," he added.

He also underscored the importance of enhancing labour productivity through skill development. For that, public expenditure in the education sector is important, he said.

Ashraf Ahmed, president of DCCI, said: "We do not have much time as Bangladesh is going to graduate

from LDC status in 2026, which is knocking at the door.”

He added that while it is true that the government of Bangladesh is committed to supporting the business community to create a commendable position in the international market, the private sector needs sustainable policy reforms in the days to come.

“The more conducive the business environment is, the faster we can achieve the ‘strategic bets approach’ to have more products in our export basket,” he said.

Asif Ashraf, director of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said that the special incentives provided to the RMG sector had been scaled down recently, questioning why such a decision was taken before 2026.

Pointing out that exports were still dominated by the RMG sector, he also said the non-cotton market had the most potential but it remained untapped by local manufacturers.

Mohammed Mahbubur Rahman Patwary, managing director of Sonali Aansh Industry Ltd, added: “We have to incentivise non-RMG products that have the potential to grow. After LDC graduation, most incentives will not be effective. We may examine the examples of countries who have already graduated and see how they are managing their main export basket.”

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 20-2-2024

The farce of expressing PCI in taka

Birupaksha Paul

On February 15, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) announced the country’s per capita income (PCI) as Tk 273,360 for FY 2022-23. The figure was Tk 241,047 in FY 2021-22, suggesting a 13.41 percent increase in PCI. The report also confirms that BBS, from now on, will announce PCI figures in taka instead of in the US dollar because of the dollar’s price hike. This has triggered both questions and concerns about their intent. So, based on the official exchange rate of Tk 110 per dollar, the PCI for FY 2022-23 turns out to be \$2,485 while the figure was \$2,688 for FY 2021-22, as World Bank (WB) data suggests. Since this shows a negative growth figure of 7.6 percent, BBS is seeking shelter under the blanket of reporting the PCI in taka.

This is nothing more than a poor trick that will eventually produce no real gain. Taka has inflated against the dollar, and BBS is using that weakness to look at it as a strength. Think of it this way: in the winter, expressing the temperature in Fahrenheit instead of degrees Celsius will surely make the numbers appear higher. But it won’t give any extra comfort or warmth to the poor who are vulnerable to the shivering cold of

Poush and Magh. The US dollar is the single international currency for exchange and comparison, and hence all multilateral agencies/institutions use the dollar to study the states of all economies around the world. Bangladesh cannot stand out of this queue as an exception just because expressing PCI in dollars looks less attractive for reference or political discourse.

The country navigated a tumultuous journey after its independence in 1971. The PCI was merely \$91 in 1972, and it reached \$260 in 1975. However, the PCI fell to \$133 in 1976 and \$124 in 1977. But the regimes did not switch to taka in describing the country’s PCI to the global community. WB data suggests that Bangladesh’s PCI was \$413 in 2000 and fell slightly to \$410 in 2001. Even then, the Awami League regime did not resort to using taka instead of the US dollar simply because figures in taka might look higher than what they would in dollars.

Some companies use strategic pricing, such as by marking the price of an item to be \$9.99 instead of \$10, in order to attract customers. Some credit card companies mention the annual percentage rate (APR) instead of the effective annual rate (EAR) simply because APR looks slightly smaller than EAR to credit card customers though, eventually, the card companies charge interest as per EAR anyway. Commercial companies use such tricks as part of their marketing plan and to maximise profits. But people do not expect marketing tactics to be used by the state statistical agency that is obligated to work with integrity and honesty.

It is imperative to understand why the PCI is bound to fall based on the developments of the last three years. Since 2017, Bangladesh Bank kept taka’s value artificially high against the dollar, and it helped show both GDP and PCI figures in dollars to be higher than what they really were. But this became impossible to continue by 2022, when the taka’s value collapsed against the dollar. Per WB’s World Development Indicators (WDI), the exchange rate was Tk 85 per dollar in 2001. But the market price by December 2023 per dollar was no less than Tk 120, suggesting roughly a 12 percent fall in taka’s value per year since 2001. Meanwhile, per capita GDP growth, which was 5.5 percent over the same period on average, was not enough to help us overcome the collapse in taka’s value, making a drop in PCI inevitable. This can happen to any country, and it is not a point of shame that needs to be covered up.

Bangladesh Bank’s Monetary Policy Statement (January-June, 2024) calculates taka’s depreciation at 13.8 percent in FY 2023. As per latest news reports, the government’s revised GDP growth for the same fiscal year turns out to be 5.78 percent. The GDP growth rate, after discounting for the population growth rate of 1.1 percent, roughly gives us the per capita GDP growth

rate of 4.68 percent which fell much behind the depreciation rate, essentially generating a PCI figure in dollars lower than last year. This is how maths goes, so why does BBS need to hide that reality? This is reminiscent of my childhood, when I used to hide my maths and English mark sheets whenever I scored below the passing mark.

To add perspective, India experienced a fall in its PCI at least five times since 1990 because of various domestic as well as global shocks, but it never resorted to switching to Indian rupees when expressing the PCI.

No matter how developed an economy is, no one in the world has been able to rule out the inevitability of business cycles. And if that is true, the dogma that PCI can never move back is simply a misconception. Bangladesh's institutions must pay more attention to economics rather than to sugar-coating numbers with politics in mind.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 29-2-2024

Cold chain: US investment can save \$2.5b a yr

Bangladesh incurs a \$2.5 billion annual loss due to a 44 percent post-harvest loss of fruits, crops, and vegetables, thanks to a shortage of storage and transport facilities, which drives up prices for consumers.

Now the government is considering incentives for US businesses interested in investing in cold storage facilities in Bangladesh.

The issues were discussed at the Cold Chain Investment Conference 2024 organised by the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority and the Bangladesh Trade Facilitation Project under the US Department of Agriculture in Dhaka on Wednesday. Salman F Rahman, the prime ministers adviser on private industry and investment, said at the programme the government was searching for ways to subsidise the interest on loans for businesses in the sector after a rise in lending rates.

"The US Embassy informed us that investment in Bangladesh's cold chain can be a special opportunity for American businesses," he said.

William Fellows, executive managing director at LixCap which provides business development advisory services as well as blended finance and investment solutions for emerging markets, presented the keynote at the conference.

He said Bangladesh faces an estimated \$2.4 billion loss every year because of destruction of 20-44 percent of fruits, crops and vegetables produced by the country.

Cold chain logistics investment can reduce the post-harvest losses significantly, he said.

For example, Fellows said Bangladesh may not need to import onions and potatoes if it can improve its cold chain.

He also said \$440 million investment is possible in the sector within 2031.

Besides saving the agricultural products, Bangladesh will see a boost in sectors like transport and packaging, he added. —bdnews24.com

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 25-2-2024

Industrial Hemp: ancient remedy for ailing Sri Lankan economy

By Dr. Prasanna J.P. Gunawardena

Ayurveda is a natural system of medicine that originated nearly 3,000 years ago, it has long attributed different parts of the hemp plant to a variety of curative purposes. In fact, the Vedas, estimated to be at least 3,400 years old, refer to it as one of the five most sacred plants.

"Hemp" is defined as a *Cannabis sativa* L. plant – or any part of the plant – in which the concentration of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is less than the regulated maximum level. Although Cannabis is used as a drug as it contains a psychoactive component, industrial hemp is a distinct strain with unique phytochemical compositions and uses.

Similarly, industrial hemp should not be confused with "drug-type" cannabis, commonly known as "marijuana" (*Cannabis Indica*), which is a variety of Cannabis with very high levels of THC (up to 20 percent).

Due to the similarities between industrial hemp (fibre and grain) and the narcotic/medical type of Cannabis, the production of industrial hemp was prohibited in most countries, wiping out centuries of learning and genetic resources. In the past two decades, most countries have legalised industrial hemp production, prompting a significant amount of research on the health benefits of hemp and hemp products.

The controversial association of industrial hemp with medical Cannabis has also slowed expansion efforts. Therefore, breeding of hemp to clearly differentiate it from medical Cannabis may accelerate its development and consumer acceptance, as well as ease regulatory barriers of the crop.

There are 75 different hemp varieties registered in the EU Catalogue and all of them have a low THC content (currently up to 0, 2 percent), which means it is not psychoactive. All parts of the plant – stalks, seeds, flowers and leaves – can be harvested and processed, making hemp a versatile plant with multiple uses.

This means that a single crop has the potential to produce a wide range of products. Due to its versatility

and its functional characteristics, the industrial hemp market holds vast potential in agriculture, textiles, recycling, automotive, furniture, food and beverages, paper, construction materials and personal care.

The hemp industry is a cost-effective and socially responsible business that can help mitigate Climate Change, representing a shift in our current system to a circular economy. The versatile nature of hemp potentially represents multi-billion dollars downstream markets, particularly in manufacturing of reusable, recyclable and compostable biomaterials.

Being so diverse, industrial hemp can be a revolutionary plant for a better future and upcoming generations. Due to its immense contributions, hemp is emerging as a vital agricultural commodity.

It is an eco-friendly and worthwhile crop that complements a sustainable growth system. Growing hemp can improve the local economy and create job possibilities, particularly in agriculture-dependent areas. The revival of this centuries-old multifaceted crop can be a turning point and shows ways to change the livelihood of farmers worldwide. The benefits of hemp production will improve farmers' socio-economic status and may potentially contribute to a significant increase in GDP per capita.

Industrial applications of hemp

Industrial hemp can be used for its fibre, seed, or oil. Over time, industrial hemp has evolved into an even greater variety of products, including health foods, organic body care, clothing, construction materials, biofuels, plastic composites, and more.

The market is experiencing growth due to several factors, including the functional characteristics of hemp seeds and hemp seed oil, their numerous benefits, and their expanding utilisation in commercial applications. Moreover, the market is experiencing growth driven by the increasing demand for hemp-based products, which offer various health benefits and cater to the rising prevalence of conditions like epilepsy and sleep disorders.

The demand for hemp has seen a significant surge in recent times. During the pandemic, people turned to hemp products for its various benefits, which fueled its adoption. Regulations of several countries started enabling research and medical cultivation, opening doors for further exploration. The legalisation of hemp in several global markets, including the US, EU, and Canada, has attracted players and investments to the sector.

Industrial hemp production has remained legal throughout most of the world. Approximately 30 countries in Europe, Asia, and North and South America allow farmers to grow hemp. The world hemp fiber market continues to be dominated by China. Other

notable countries include France, Germany, the U.K., The Netherlands, Chile, and South Korea.

In July 2018, Uttarakhand became the first Indian state to legalise hemp farming. Naturally, it is now the largest hemp producing state in India. Since then, several other states, such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar, have also shown interest in legalising hemp cultivation.

As it stands, Sri Lanka has strict restrictions on the cultivation of cannabis, with exemptions permitted for indigenous medicines. Currently, Sri Lankan lawmakers are drawing up proposals that could see medical cannabis cultivation and exportation legalised.

The move is significant, as it could pave the way for the commercial production of hemp in the country and allow farmers to tap into the lucrative global hemp market. It could also lead to the creation of new jobs and revenue streams for Sri-Lanka which we direly need right now as well as promote sustainable agriculture practices.

The global industrial hemp market size is projected to grow from US\$ 7.90 billion in 2023 to US\$ 31.98 billion by 2030, at a CAGR of 22.11 percent during the forecast period. One of the main drivers of the economic benefits of growing it is the rapid growth of the CBD market. CBD, or cannabidiol, is a non-psychoactive compound in hemp and marijuana. It is believed to have many health benefits, from reducing pain and inflammation to alleviating anxiety and depression. As a result, the CBD market has exploded in recent years, with sales projected to reach US\$ 20 billion by 2025.

Cultivating hemp is a promising new opportunity for farmers. The crop is relatively easy to grow and requires less water and pesticides than traditional crops such as cotton. In addition, it can grow in a wide range of climates, from hot and dry to cool and damp. It can also be a great opportunity for small-scale farmers. The crop requires less land and resources than traditional crops, which means that even small plots of land can become hemp farms.

Hemp farming has the potential to improve water conservation in several ways. Hemp has deep roots, which help prevent soil erosion and retain moisture. It is particularly important in areas prone to drought or water scarcity. This means it requires less irrigation than other crops, which can help conserve water resources.

It is an excellent substitute for paper, which is traditionally made from wood pulp. It grows quickly and can be harvested in just 3-4 months. It requires fewer chemicals and less energy to produce, making it a more sustainable and eco-friendly option.

It is an efficient and cost-effective crop to grow, with a yield of up to 4 times more than cotton per acre. Moreover, it requires less water and fewer pesticides

and grows faster than cotton. It is also more resilient to pests and diseases, so farmers can save money on expensive chemicals and treatments. The whole hemp plant can be used for various products, including food, textiles, and building materials. Farmers can, therefore, maximise their profits by selling multiple products from a single crop.

Environmental benefits

Industrial hemp can help mitigate the effects of Climate Change, as it captures significant amounts of carbon dioxide by storing it in both stems and roots during photosynthesis. Industrial hemp may capture more carbon dioxide per hectare than other commercial crops or some forests.

Hemp is susceptible to fewer pests because of the lack of natural predators, which means that the use of insecticides, herbicides, and fungicides can be avoided in most cases, thereby decreasing pollution levels.

Hemp is extremely suitable as a rest crop, because of its deep rooting, hemp cultivation contributes greatly to soil organic matter accumulation. The hemp plant can return previously leached nitrogen back into the mineral cycle. Being a fast-growing crop and having a high leaf turnover rate, hemp can, if grown in ideal conditions, fully cover the ground for three weeks post-germination. Hemp can also be used with great efficiency in land reclamation. It is considered as an optimal pioneer crop, notably because of its phytoremediation capacity.

Its processing generates zero waste. All parts of hemp, from the roots to the flowers, can be used or further transformed. That is why the real added value of industrial hemp is its ability to produce different products with one crop: food, feed, cosmetics, biomaterials, energy while achieving positive environmental externalities with one rotational crop. Industrial hemp can contribute to food security. Hemp Seeds are rich in essential fatty acids (omega 3 and omega 6), proteins, carbohydrates (particularly insoluble fibers), vitamins and minerals.

Hemp is not only a treasure for the industrial sector but also a perfect plant for sustainable farming systems. The benefits of industrial hemp cultivation will uplift the socio-economic level of the farmers and significantly increase the GDP of Sri-Lanka.

Industrial hemp is a multi-purpose crop. The unique properties of the plant make it a highly valuable and sustainable crop. There are more than 25,000 hemp-based products available worldwide. It is an eco-friendly and worthwhile crop that complements a sustainable growth system. Industrial hemp farming has the potential to dramatically minimize the amount of carbon impact on the environment and can be cultivated with little or no usage of chemical pesticides or fertilisers.

The growth of the hemp industry, however, will depend primarily on the legislative structure. We should realise the importance of this amazing plant and initiate marketing and growth policies that will be beneficial for both our economy and the environment. There is a need for a comprehensive policy framework that addresses issues such as THC content, licensing, and infrastructure development.

The Government should also work towards creating awareness about the benefits of industrial hemp and its various applications, which could help increase demand for Sri-Lankan hemp products in the global market.

The writer is based in the Netherlands

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 16-2-2024

Sri Lanka needs to balance taxes, reforms, and debt recovery

Tightrope Walk

Chandra Edirisuriya

President Ranil Wickremesinghe, in the preamble to his 2024 Budget Speech, initially recounted how he accomplished the task of rescuing the country from the state of bankruptcy into which it had been reduced. He earned the plaudits of a grateful Nation for this singular feat. He also came under praise by the admiring international community. More recently, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni particularly lauded him for the country's reconstruction in a very astute manner within so short a period.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe underscored the transformative nature of the 2024 Budget, positioning it as a pivotal step towards shaping the country's future and establishing a modern economic framework aligned with global trends. He also said in his Budget Speech that the success of the path taken so far lies in the economic reform programme that has been commenced. This reform programme has laid the foundation for progress, steering us away from economic turmoil such as the one experienced in 2022.

Since 2013, the practice of revising the electricity bill in accordance with the Government expenditure on electricity generation has not been followed. So, the Ceylon Electricity Board suffered enormous losses. Until 2022, loans were obtained from the two State banks to offset these losses.

Critical situation

Similarly, the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, which incurs unbelievable losses, offsets its losses through the two State banks. This escalated to a critical situation where the balance sheets of the two State banks are now in a very weak state. The government has to provide

funds to strengthen these banks. Where would we get such funds from? The tax revenue collected from the public is used for this purpose.

Loans are obtained from State banks to offset the losses of the State-owned enterprises. Hence, the Government provides funds to the banks when they become weak to prevent them from collapsing. The Government will need to increase the tax burden on the people to find such funds.

Some groups protest, demanding a salary increase. Not only the public servants but also the whole country suffer nowadays. We have to move forward day by day, step by step, toward recovery from this difficult situation. It's a tough journey. On one hand, the strikes deteriorate the country's way forward. On the other hand, the majority of the people are suffering.

I wish to mention about the salary increases. Salary increases cannot be done on an ad-hoc basis. Thirty-five per cent of the Government revenue is spent to pay salaries for the public servants. To increase wages, the government's revenue also has to be increased.

Samajeevikatha principle

Even without increasing the revenue, salaries can be increased. But how can we do it? We have to print money. Or else, borrow from a foreign country. Or else, impose new taxes. That is against the Samajeevikatha principle. Such actions may again drive the country downwards.

The Ceylon Electricity Board spends a significant amount on power generation. Therefore, we lifted all legal barriers to add low-cost mega-scale renewable energy generation to its main grid network. The legislation process is ongoing to restructure the inefficient Ceylon Electricity Board as an efficient institution. The cost of power to the people will be eased upon implementing the institutional changes to generate power efficiently.

Some political groups are against restructuring the Ceylon Electricity Board as an efficient institution. They demand to reduce the power tariff at any cost. This will lead us again to be trapped in the same vicious cycle. It is against the Samajeevikatha concept.

There are criticisms over increasing the Government taxes. Why were we supposed to increase taxes? We neglected to change tax structures and tax restructuring for ages. This made the fiscal sector weak. Structural changes in the tax system were necessary to strengthen the fiscal sector.

Social welfare

A sum of Rs. 93 billion is spent each month to finance the government's salary bill. A sum of Rs. 70 billion is required for social welfare schemes such as Aswesuma, Elders allowance, pensions, etc. Meanwhile, Rs. 220

billion is spent to settle loan interest payments. The public expenditure on these requirements is Rs. 383 billion per month. The Government revenue collected within the first nine months of 2023 is Rs. 215 billion. The shortage is Rs. 168 billion. More loans are needed to meet this shortage.

How was this shortage financed so far? It is financed through foreign loans and bank overdrafts. When it is impossible to meet the shortage through these methods, it is done through money printing.

Until the Foreign Debt Restructuring is completed, the foreign financing and loans we can obtain are constrained. Bank overdrafts amounting to Rs. 900 billion have been obtained in the year 2021. Currently, the total overdrafts are brought to a lower level of Rs. 70 billion.

According to the new Central Bank Act, Money Printing is not allowed. Therefore, if we can't increase the Government revenue by 10 per cent to 15 per cent, we will end up with an economic hell again. If the taxes are reduced, that gap has to be filled with something else. As some groups propose, simple and sweet promises cannot resolve this issue.

Targeted revenue

Our revenue target for this year is Rs. 3,415 billion. Out of that, we have collected Rs. 2,410 billion so far. This shows that we have failed to generate the targeted revenue. We have to work hard to collect the targeted revenue.

We requested several times from the people who earn higher incomes to open a tax file. However, the majority of them did not accede. The main reason is they believe that there will be unnecessary troubles if they open a new tax file. Yes, it is true. There are unnecessary complexities in tax collection. Taxpayers have to bear the unnecessary influences of some officers. There are payment methods that make the payment of taxes a headache.

Likewise, we have identified several critical issues in our tax system. At present, the burden of taxes is placed only on a few slices of society. Tax evasion happens due to the long-lasting weaknesses and negligence of the tax collection systems.

We have included several proposals in this Budget to rectify these issues. These proposals cannot be implemented overnight. They should be implemented gradually. We will be able to provide more tax concessions in the future when the Government revenue is increased through these proposals.

Government revenue

Some people state that the burden of taxes on the people can be reduced by reducing the Government revenue. However, the major portion of the Government revenue,

35 per cent, is spent on public servants' salaries and social welfare. The workforce in the public sector is 1.3 million. We cannot remove them from their jobs even though the number is excessive. If we do so, it will lead to a social issue. Therefore, these issues have to be confronted sensitively and carefully.

However, we have to stop unnecessary expenditure. How much money is wasted at Government institutions? How much time is wasted? We have to avoid these wastages. How much time, effort, and money are wasted when an ordinary citizen goes to a Government institution for their necessity? We have to rectify these deficiencies also.

The public suffers due to the loss-making State-owned enterprises. The public bears the loss of these institutions. The political groups that call them national treasures are piling up the burden of these loss-making State-owned enterprises and pulling the whole nation backwards.

Meanwhile, corruption and fraud are spread everywhere over the country like cancer. We have introduced laws and acts that prevent the theft of the nation's wealth. There are allegations that some persons have stolen the wealth and resources of the nation. However, we have to rethink about the people who stole the wealth and resources of the Nation as well as the future of the Nation.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 19-2-2024

Debt restructuring will be completed by June

**Negotiations on sovereign bonds
to conclude by April**

Dharma Sri Abeyratne and Jayasiri Munasinghe

Finance State Minister Dr. Ranjith Siyambalapitiya said that the government's aim is to complete the domestic and foreign debt restructuring process by June.

Siyambalapitiya said that 90 billion US dollars domestic and foreign debts will be restructured by June.

The State Minister emphasized that the most challenging economic problem faced by the country in recent times was reaching agreements with the creditors to repay the government's domestic and foreign debts in a concessional manner. Accordingly, the domestic credit optimization has been totally completed by now.

The state minister who commented further in this regard also said by the time the economic crisis occurred in

2022, there was 90 billion dollars in domestic and foreign debt.

Half of it was domestic debt and the remaining half was foreign debt. The domestic credit optimization has now been fully completed. Foreign loans consist of two parts namely multilateral and bilateral loans. The multi-party debt is being paid continuously. However negotiations regarding the restructuring of bilateral foreign debt are currently being held very successfully. We also hope to conclude the negotiations regarding the loan between the countries by the end of March.

Negotiations on sovereign bonds are scheduled to conclude by April. Also, the minister stated that the goal of the government is to complete the debt restructuring process, which is the worst economic problem in this country by June.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 29-2-2024

Speedy power system integration programme planned with India

Senior Indian Power officials meet Minister:

130 MW Sampur project gets top priority:

Rakshana Sriyantha

Discussions were held with Indian Power sector officials to speed up electricity projects in Sri Lanka under the Indian partnership. These projects include the planned power system integration programme with India.

Officials from the Indian power sector headed by India's Power Ministry Secretary Pankaj Agrawal and High Commissioner Santhosh Jha visited the Power and Energy Ministry on Tuesday (27) and engaged in discussion with the Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekera.

The power system integration programme planned with India, the 130 MW Sampur power project, the electrification project proposed to be implemented in three islands in Jaffna District, as well as the government's policy regarding other renewable energy projects implemented with Indian investment, their current progress and implementation timeline were discussed.

The Indian delegation consisting of senior officials representing the Indian Energy Ministry, Central Electricity Authority of India, National Thermal Power Corporation of India and Power Grid Company will stay in the country for three days and participate in the discussions regarding energy cooperation between the two countries.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 22-2-2024

CEMS Lanka Exhibitions form Feb. 29 at SLECC

JAAF hails ECTA with India

Shirajiv Sirimane

Secretary General, Joint Apparel Association Forum Sri Lanka (JAAF) Yohan Lawrence hailed the proposed signing of the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) with India.

“The ECTA will create renewed export opportunities to the Sri Lankan apparel sector,” he said. Under the current FTA, Sri Lanka is only permitted to export 8 million pieces of ready-made apparel to India without applicable duties.

He opined this at the launch of the ‘CEMS Lanka (Pvt) Ltd’ organised Textile / Garment Machinery, Dyes & Chemicals, Yarn & Fabric, Power & Energy and Shipping & Logistics exhibitions which will be held on February 29 to March 2 at SLECC hall Colombo Fort. CEMS have cooperated with JAAF, Sri Lanka Apparel Exporters Association, Industrial Development Board, Ministry of Power & Energy, Sri Lanka Ports Authority for this event.

The Indian middle class is growing at a rapid pace and there is a demand for Made in Sri Lanka apparels to India. “if apparel export quota could be increased it could bring in more FOREX to Sri Lanka and this can be done through signing of the ECTA.” In 2022, India and Australia signed the ECTA, which helped to increase trade between the two countries.

“Textech Sri Lanka International Expo gives a good opportunity for local apparel companies specially the SME ones to acquire new technology, get new machinery and have better access to raw materials via new partners who will be participating at the event all under one roof.”

Chairman/ CEO of Sri Lanka Export Development Board (EDB) Dr. Kingsley Bernard said that due to global geo-politics and other issues apparel exports from Sri Lanka were far below potential last year. “However the scenario is now changing for the better and we expect the industry to be back to its robust line soon.”

Group CEO of CEMS-Global USA, S. S. Sarwar, said that they launched exhibitions in Sri Lanka soon after ending of LTTE hostilities and since then, CEMS-Global with its CEMS Lanka office has been giving all its efforts and held important B2B Trade Shows for the

Textile & Apparel Industry, Logistics & Shipping, and Power & Energy sectors of the country.

CEMS Global USA’s B2B Trade Exhibitions span various industries and 4 continents, and one of its notable series focuses on the Textile sector.

“Our Textile Series of Exhibitions which are held in Bangladesh, Brazil, Morocco, Sri Lanka and Thailand; serve as a vital platform for Global Manufacturers of the textile and apparel sector to come together, tap highly potential markets, and showcase the latest trends, products, and technologies.”

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 21-2-2024

SLPBC signs two MoUs, with Pakistan Int’l Business Trade Industry in Lahore

The Sri Lanka-Pakistan Business Council (SLPBC) of The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce in collaboration with the Pakistan High Commission in Sri Lanka led a 10-member business delegation to the third Expo Engineering and Healthcare Show in Lahore recently.

Spearheaded by the President of the SLPBC Indra Kaushal Rajapaksha, the delegation joined over 600 delegates from 70 countries at the exposition organized by the Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP) and the Ministry of Commerce and Export Development Fund of Pakistan, showcasing sectors such as agriculture, automotive, pharmaceuticals, and more.

During the tour President of the SLPBC signed two MoUs, with the Pakistan International Business Trade Industry and Commerce and with the Gujranwala Business Center aimed at fostering industrial and business collaboration and enhancing trade relations, while an existing MoU between The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce and the Lahore Chamber of Commerce was renewed and further strengthened to add vigor to relations between the two Chambers.

In its efforts to strengthen business, economic, tourism and cultural ties between the two countries the SLPBC I organized a meeting with the State Minister of Foreign Affairs Tharaka Balasuriya and discussed future strategies in developing trade, economic and cultural ties between the two countries.

Through such proactive initiatives, the SLPBC executes its mandate to contribute towards enhancing bilateral relations and supporting its Members to establish and fortify business opportunities in Pakistan as well as with their Pakistan business counterparts in Sri Lanka.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 23-2-2024

Foreign aid spending remains poor compared to use of domestic resources

Spending on Asian Development Bank support stands at eight percent and 14 percent in the case of the World Bank in the first half of the current fiscal year.

Post Report

Aid spending by Nepal's government agencies continues to remain poor with the utilisation of foreign grants and loans standing below 15 percent as of the first half of the current fiscal year.

According to a mid-term review of the budget 2023-24, foreign grant spending stood at just 10.82 percent of the funds allocated under the heading. The spending on foreign loans stood at 13.37 percent of the resources allocated under foreign loans.

During the same period last fiscal year (2022–23), grant and loan spending was 13.01 percent and 11.79 percent, respectively.

Spending on foreign resources has remained poor compared to domestic resources. During the first half of the current fiscal, 36.26 percent of domestic resources were spent, the report said.

Officials said that one reason behind higher spending on domestic resources compared to foreign resources is that most local resources are used as recurrent expenditures—such as salary, pension, administrative costs and fiscal transfer to provincial and local governments.

“It is not that donors’ resources are not used in recurrent expenditures,” said Dhani Ram Sharma, spokesperson for the finance ministry.

“Majority foreign aid is however used in mega projects whose implementation has remained poor, leading to a poor spending of external resources.”

Foreign aid contributes hugely to bridging the resource gap in various government programmes. When the budget was presented in May 2023 for the current fiscal year, the government aimed for Rs242.26 billion in foreign loans and Rs55.45 billion in foreign grants while revenue collection was expected to reach Rs1.49 trillion.

According to Sharma, a huge amount of foreign resources has been allocated for the construction of highways and transmission lines but the pace of implementation of those projects remains slow.

But officials said red tape is also delaying key infrastructure projects.

They pointed out that delays in site clearance by forest and environmental authorities are also slowing down work at infrastructure projects involving both domestic

and foreign resources. Besides, donor-funded projects follow a long procedure for hiring consultants and contractors.

“We need a no-objection letter to hire a contractor,” said Sushil Babu Dhakal, director general at the Department of Roads.

“For example, we are evaluating the bids for hiring a contractor to expand the Butwal-Gorusinge road but the evaluation report should go to the World Bank for its approval.”

According to Dhakal, money is not a problem in donor-funded projects but the lengthy procedure for hiring the contractor delays their implementation.

In the case of bilateral aid, usually, only the goods and contractors belonging to the donor country are involved in construction.

For example, the Chinese government is funding the expansion of the Ring Road in Kathmandu Valley. China brings its own contractors and workers to implement the project.

“The work plan in this project is out of our control as the Chinese government implements the project as per its own schedule,” said Dhakal.

The road department is one of the largest recipients of foreign resources as it undertakes the building and expansion of highways. “The contractors failing to mobilise their own resources are also hindering the progress in donor-funded projects,” said Dhakal, the department chief. “The lack of timely availability of construction materials is also hampering the implementation of infrastructure projects.”

According to the mid-term review, spending of resources under the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) remained poorest—at 0.05 percent of the allocated amount.

Among the major multilateral donors, spending of resources under the Asian Development Bank also remained poor at 8.05 percent during the first half of the current fiscal year while spending of the World Bank’s resources stood at 14.71 percent. These two are the biggest foreign aid providers to Nepal.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 26-2-2024

The poverty paradox

The steady rise in urban poverty calls for a shift in the country’s rural areas-centric approach

With 66 percent of Nepal’s population living in municipalities, its urban population has steadily increased over the years, and so has urban poverty. According to the recently published fourth Living Standard Survey 2022-23 of the National Statistics

Office, urban poverty climbed up to 18.34 percent in 2022-23, from 15.46 percent in 2010-11. Meanwhile, rural poverty came down to 24.66 percent, from 27.43 percent in 2010-11. The poverty percentage is the highest in Sudurpaschim Province (34.16 percent) and the lowest in Gandaki Province (11.88 percent).

It is common knowledge that people migrate to cities in search of better opportunities, infrastructure, education and health facilities. Also, when they are dissatisfied with their limited lives in remote places, they seek refuge in cities and urban areas. However, only a handful of people who make the transition can earn a proper living, while many others end up in slums with poor sanitation, inadequate shelter and dirty potable water. This is in fact a worldwide problem. The United Nations Statistics Division shows that between 2014 and 2018, the population living in urban slums globally rose from 23 percent to 24 percent. The issue of slum dwellers has been a headache for the office of Kathmandu Metropolitan City, as Mayor Balen Shah has often tried to drive them away without proper settlement plans.

Urban poverty remains Nepal's invisible underbelly, as policymakers' focus remains on rural poverty. It also stems from the mindset that people, just by the virtue of their living in cities, are well-off. They, therefore, cannot be poor. This is why our poverty-reduction programmes are also lopsided. One such programme run by the country's Poverty Alleviation Ministry called "Bisheshwar with the Poor", unsurprisingly, focuses only on the rural poor. While it is vital to cut down on rural poverty, the importance of programmes aimed at alleviating (rising) urban poverty cannot be overstated.

Moreover, the government often leaves the urban poor in a lurch. For instance, even though Nepal's Urban Development Strategy 2017 was aimed at developing a vibrant urban environment, infrastructure and jobs, the authorities have fallen far behind in its implementation. The strategy also discusses implementing a Community Development Programme focused on the urban poor, housing, infrastructure and transport, which too are far from being realised.

Unless Nepal learns to deal with the urban poor, the country will continue to be beset by a high level of poverty. As per the survey, 20.27 percent of the country's population still lives below the poverty line, compared to 25.16 percent in 2011. As Nepal prepares its 16th periodic plan, urban poverty alleviation through job creation and budgetary provisions should be the government's priority. It should also include plans for federal, provincial and local levels to work together to solve slum-related problems. Indonesia, the fourth most populated country in the world, is not free of slum dwellers either. But it has effectively managed them through its mass intervention called the National Slum

Upgrading Project. We shouldn't delay emulating such interventions.

There is a need to integrate the urban poor in development programmes and policies and keep a record of those in need of immediate help and attention. As important is helping people stay in their villages and to encourage people working in urban areas to take their skills back to their rural bases. Poverty anywhere—rural or urban—is a big threat to a country aiming to achieve middle-income status and Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 22-2-2024

Iran's GDP growth stands at 5.1% in Q3: SCI

TEHRAN- Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) including oil grew 5.1 percent in the third quarter of the current Iranian calendar year (September 23-December 21, 2023), compared to the second quarter of the year, according to the Statistical Centre of Iran (SCI).

Based on the SCI data, the figure excluding oil increased by 2.5 percent, Tasnim News Agency reported.

The SCI data indicate that in the autumn of the current Iranian year, the oil and gas sector was the leading sector growing by 21.8 percent, the industry sector grew by 1.3 percent, the mining sector grew by 0.3 percent and the services sector grew by 4.6 percent compared to the Q3 1401.

Previously, the Iranian Statistics Center had announced the economic growth rate of the summer to be 7.1 percent with oil and 4.2 percent without oil.

Earlier in January, the World Bank, in its latest Global Economic Prospects (GEP) report released on January 9, said the Iranian economy grew by 4.2 percent in 2023, despite a sharp, long-lasting slowdown in the global economy.

Based on the WB data, the economic growth of West Asian and North African countries decreased from 5.8 percent in 2022 to 1.9 percent in 2023, indicating that Iran's GDP growth in 2023 was more than twice the economic growth of this region.

"Growth picked up in the Islamic Republic of Iran, as increases in oil production and exports more than offset weak external non-oil demand," the report said.

According to the estimates of this international organization, following the global economy, Iran's economic growth is also expected to recede slightly to 3.7 percent in 2024. The Islamic Republic's GDP growth in 2022 was 3.8 percent.

The economic growth of Europe and Central Asia, which decreased from 7.1 percent in 2021 to 1.2 percent in 2022, also grew slightly to 2.7 in 2023 however the figure is seen to fall to 2.4 percent in 2024.

According to the report, global growth is projected to slow for the third year in a row—from 2.6 percent last year to 2.4 percent in 2024, almost three-quarters of a percentage point below the average of the 2010s. Developing economies are projected to grow just 3.9 percent, more than one percentage point below the average of the previous decade.

“After a disappointing performance last year, low-income countries should grow 5.5 percent, weaker than previously expected. By the end of 2024, people in about one out of every four developing countries and about 40 percent of low-income countries will still be poorer than they were on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. In advanced economies, meanwhile, growth is set to slow to 1.2 percent this year from 1.5 percent in 2023,” the WB stated.

“As the world nears the midpoint of what was intended to be a transformative decade for development, the global economy is set to rack up a sorry record by the end of 2024 —the slowest half-decade of GDP growth in 30 years,” the entity said.

By one measure, the global economy is in a better place than it was a year ago: the risk of a global recession has receded, largely because of the strength of the U.S. economy. But mounting geopolitical tensions could create fresh near-term hazards for the world economy, according to the report.

- EF/MA

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 17-2-2024

Iran, Armenia ink 19 co-op documents during 18th Joint Economic Committee meeting

TEHRAN - The 18th meeting of the Iran-Armenia Joint Economic Committee was held in Tehran during February 14-15, in which the two sides signed 19 documents and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) to enhance cooperation in various areas.

The mentioned documents covered a variety of areas including trade development, customs cooperation, maritime transportation, food, and medicine.

The 18th meeting of the Iran-Armenia Joint Economic Committee meeting, hosted by Iran's Plan and Budget Organization (PBO), was attended by senior officials and ministers from the two sides including the PBO Head Davoud Manzour, Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia Mher Grigoryan, Armenian Minister of Territorial Administration and Infrastructures Gnel

Sanosyan, Armenia's Deputy Minister of Economy Narek Teryan, and the Head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) Mehdi Zeighami.

Tehran, Yerevan eye \$3b of annual trade

Speaking at the meeting, Mher Grigoryan said Iran and Armenia can increase their annual trade to \$3 billion.

Underlining the significance of the two countries' Joint Economic Committee meeting, Grigoryan said: “Considering the relations and cooperation between the two countries, we can implement the agreed matters with joint efforts and take the necessary steps for ensuring the interests of the people of the two countries.”

“Iran is not just a neighboring country for us, but a very important partner and we have to deepen the relations between the two countries,” he stressed.

Iranian government fully supports implementation of agreements with Armenia: Raisi

Prior to attending the second day of the Joint Committee meeting on Thursday, Grigoryan held a meeting with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, during which Raisi said his government fully supports the agreements reached with Armenia.

“We support the implementation of all agreements made between Tehran and Yerevan, and (implementing these agreements) requires efforts and diligent follow-up of the Joint Economic Committee of the two countries,” the president said.

Iran, Armenia could be gateway to Eurasia

On the sidelines of the meeting, TPO Head Mehdi Zeighami held a meeting with Narek Teryan to discuss ways of expanding trade relations.

In this meeting, Zeighami said Iran and Armenia could be the gateway to link east to Eurasia by developing their transportation infrastructure at borders.

“Having a common land border, Iran and Armenia can act as a gateway to Eurasia by developing road infrastructure and transit routes,” he said.

Armenia welcomes Iranian companies' participation in infrastructure projects

In another meeting on the sidelines of the event, Armenian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Vahan Kostanyan met with Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Mehdi Safari in which he called on Iranian companies to participate in Armenia's road construction and infrastructure projects.

Armenia, Iran could soon enhance energy swap deal

Earlier on Tuesday, February 13, Armenian Minister of Territorial Administration and Infrastructures Gnel Sanosyan said that Armenia and Iran could soon increase the volumes of the gas for electricity swap deal.

The gas-for-electricity agreement between Armenia and Iran has been extended until 2030 and enables Armenia to import greater volumes of natural gas and export more electricity. "I believe that in terms of the legal documentation we have implemented the important phase and soon, as required, according to needs and also infrastructures, we will be able to use that opportunity. New power transmission lines are under construction in order to be able to export greater volumes of electricity to Iran. Both sides have the desire to increase the volumes, and the changes will be visible in various stages," Sanosyan told Armenpress.

The minister also spoke about the involvement of Iranian companies in construction projects in Armenia. He said that the bigger the project the harder it is to find contractors.

Iran ready to export medicine to Armenia

Also during the two countries' Joint Economic Committee meeting, the Head of Iran's Food and Drug Administration (IFDA) Heidar Mohammadi voiced the country's readiness to export domestically produced drugs to Armenia.

Iran enjoys self-sufficiency in the production of drugs and pharmaceutical equipment, he said.

For her part, Deputy Minister of Healthcare of Armenia Lena Nanushyan said that Iran has made significant progress in the production of medicines and medical equipment.

Armenia welcomes cooperation with Iran in the field of health tourism, pharmaceutical insurance, and healthcare, the official added.

EF/MA

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 27-2-2024

Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project recommences after ten-year delay

TEHRAN - In a significant step towards enhancing energy cooperation between Pakistan and Iran, Islamabad has given the green light for advancing much-delayed work on the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline within its territory. The approval comes as Pakistan has scrambled to avoid a staggering 18-billion-dollar fine, with the government authorizing the commencement of long-awaited work on the initial 80-kilometer phase within its borders, Shana reported.

Analysts say the project will improve Pakistan's energy security and support regional industries by providing stable and enhanced gas supplies. Iran has extended the project deadline by 180 days until September 2024 to avoid a legal dispute with Pakistan at international tribunals.

The project, launched in 2013, had initially required Pakistan to finish the construction of the pipeline on its territory by the end of 2014. However, the project faced prolonged delays due to the potential challenges it posed for Pakistan amid international sanctions targeting Iran.

The delay has upset Iran, which has already invested \$2.0 billion in the pipeline on its side of the border having completed its section of the pipeline.

Pakistan had also expressed its commitment to constructing an 800-kilometer pipeline to the Iranian border by the end of 2014. However, Islamabad couldn't fulfill its end of the bargain amid U.S. pressure and under threat of sanctions.

The IP pipeline will allow Pakistan to start receiving 750 million cubic feet of gas from Iran daily once the pipeline is completed and commissioned. In February 2019, Tehran notified Islamabad of its intention to move forward with arbitration court proceedings for not constructing the pipeline in Pakistan's territory within the specified time frame under the IP gas line project and invoked the penalty clause of the Gas Sales Purchase Agreement (GSPA).

In September 2019, Pakistan's Inter-State Gas Systems (ISGS) and the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) signed a revised agreement for the pipeline's construction, which stipulates that neither Iran nor Pakistan will take the other to court for delays or impose fines until 2024.

EF

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 28-2-2024

Investment deals worth over €2.5b signed in 7 free zones

TEHRAN - The Secretariat of Iran's Free Zones High Council has announced that contracts for offering 300 investment packages worth over €2.5 billion have been signed with investors in seven of the country's free zones in the first 10 months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2023-January 20, 2024).

The lands for the implementation of the investment projects have also been given to the investors, the secretariat stated.

Back in December 2023, the secretary of Iran's Free Zones High Council said that 1,000 investment packages worth nine quadrillion rials (about €20 billion) have been prepared to be offered to investors in the country's free and special economic zones.

Speaking to the press on the sidelines of the Second Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Exclusive Exhibition in Tehran, Hojatollah Abdolmaleki said: "The preparation of investment projects to introduce the

country's free and special economic zones to international economic operators and investors was put on the agenda since the beginning of the current [Iranian calendar] year (late March 2023)."

"Investment projects are considered as a tool to introduce the opportunities and advantages of investment in the country's free and special economic zones to the economic operators. The preliminary studies of each of these projects have been done, the infrastructure has been provided and the necessary licenses have been issued," Abdolmaleki explained.

According to the official, the mentioned investment packages have been unveiled in four stages since the beginning of the current Iranian calendar year, the last of which worth 2.5 quadrillion rials (about \$5.0 billion) was presented in the EAEU exclusive exhibition.

The secretary of the Free Zones High Council emphasized that these zones are considered poles of economic progress, adding: "Free and special economic zones are frontiers of the country's international economy, and more than a third of the country's non-oil exports were done from these zones.

The establishment of free trade zones (FTZs) in Iran dates back to the Iranian calendar year 1368 (March 1989 - March 1990) following the fall in the country's oil income in the preceding year which prompted the government to promote non-oil exports.

The first two free trade zones of Iran were established in the south of the country. The first one was Kish Free Trade Zone established in 1368 on Kish Island in the Persian Gulf and the second one was Qeshm Free Trade Zone established the year after on Qeshm Island in the Strait of Hormuz.

Some five other free trade zones have been also established in the country since then, including Chabahar in southeastern Sistan-Baluchestan Province, Arvand in southwestern Khuzestan Province, Anzali in northern Gilan Province, Aras in East-Azarbaijan Province and Maku in West-Azarbaijan Province, both in the northwest of the country.

The development of existing free trade zones and the establishment of new FTZs has become one of the major economic approaches of the Iranian government.

EF

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 28-2-2024

Pakistan's rating likely to be upgraded if govt's external, liquidity risks fall: Moody's

The country's very weak fiscal strength and elevated political risks also constrain its credit profile

By Mehtab Haider

ISLAMABAD: Bloomberg reported that the Bank of America (BofA) raised its recommendation for Pakistan

dollar bonds to overweight from market-weight, citing falling political uncertainty after the elections and possible rating improvements.

On the other hand, Moody's Investors Service stated that Pakistan's ratings, including its Caa3 long-term issuer rating with a stable outlook, remain unchanged. It also warned about default risks for Pakistan if there were delays in funding from the IMF and other partners at the expiry of the existing Standby Arrangement (SBA) programme in April.

The Bank of America strategists, led by Vladim R Osakovskiy, wrote in a note, "We upgrade Pakistan to overweight from market weight with a fair value range of \$70-75 in the longer end of the curve. The elections-related political uncertainty is falling, as remaining policy risks are largely the same as last year and have already been addressed once through the breakthrough with the IMF. We initiate a trade buy Pakistan notes due in 2026 with a target of 83, stop loss of 69."

The bonds are trading at 77 currently. "The likely repayment of \$1bn '24s maturing in April will likely provide support to the whole curve, but mainly bring 25'-26' into the spotlight of market attention, likely forcing further bull-steepening.

"The longer end may benefit from likely progress with the new IMF programme, as the market may start to price in gradual rating improvements, as already hinted at by S&P. We note remaining political tail risks as the market may closely monitor cabinet appointments, evaluating key members on their ability to deliver on IMF conditions."

Meanwhile, Moody's warned about default risks for Pakistan if there were delays in funding from the IMF and other partners after the expiry of existing Standby Arrangement (SBA) programme in April 2024, though it underlined Pakistan's ratings with a stable outlook remains unchanged.

Moody's Investors Service (Moody's) completed a periodic review of the ratings of Pakistan in which it reassessed and stated that Pakistan's ratings, including its Caa3 long-term issuer rating, with a stable outlook remain unchanged. "Pakistan's credit profile reflects the government's very high liquidity and external vulnerability risks as the very low levels of foreign exchange reserves remain well below what is required to meet its very high external financing needs over the near to medium term" Moody's stated.

The country's very weak fiscal strength and elevated political risks also constrain its credit profile. At the same time, Pakistan's credit profile takes into account its large economy and moderate growth potential, which contribute to its moderate economic strength. It further states that Pakistan's government liquidity and external vulnerability risks remain very high, even as the caretaker government has maintained economic stability and pushed through some reforms over the past few

months, unlocking financing from the IMF and other multilateral and bilateral partners and resulting in a modest accumulation of foreign exchange reserves.

“While Pakistan is likely to meet its external debt obligations for the fiscal year ending June 2024, there is limited visibility regarding the sovereign’s sources of financing to meet its very high external financing needs after the current IMF Stand-By Arrangement ends in April 2024,” it highlighted. In addition, political risks are high, following a highly controversial general election held on 8 February 2024. Although a coalition government looks set to be formed primarily by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz Party and Pakistan Peoples Party, there is high uncertainty around the newly elected government’s willingness and ability to quickly negotiate a new IMF programme soon after the current one expires in April.

“The forthcoming coalition government’s electoral mandate may not be sufficiently strong to pursue difficult reforms that will likely be required by a successor programme. Until a new programme is agreed to, Pakistan’s ability to secure loans from other bilateral and multilateral partners will be severely constrained,” it warned.

Pakistan’s “baa3” economic strength balances the country’s large economy and moderate GDP growth potential against its low per capita income. The score also incorporates Pakistan’s high exposure to extreme weather events, such as heat waves and floods, which can create negative economic and social costs. Pakistan’s institutions and governance strength score is at “b3”, reflecting the country’s weak governance and low monetary and fiscal policy effectiveness. The “ca” fiscal strength reflects the country’s large debt burden and very weak debt affordability.

The high debt-servicing requirements associated with the large stock of debt will reduce the fiscal flexibility to undertake key expenditures on infrastructure and social initiatives. Pakistan’s susceptibility to event risk is at “caa”, driven by very high government liquidity and external vulnerability risks.

The stable outlook reflects Moody’s assessment that the pressures that Pakistan faces are consistent with a Caa3 rating level, with broadly balanced risks. Continued IMF engagement, including beyond the current programme, would help support additional financing from other multilateral and bilateral partners, which could reduce default risk if this is achieved urgently and without further raising social pressures.

At the same time, the large amount of external financing required over the medium term, combined with Pakistan’s very low reserves position, implies material default risks if there were delays in funding from the IMF and other partners. Social pressures and

weaknesses in governance may also raise challenges in meeting criteria for future IMF funding.

The rating would likely be upgraded if Pakistan’s government liquidity and external vulnerability risks decreased materially and durably. This could come with a sustainable increase in foreign exchange reserves. A resumption of fiscal consolidation, including through implementing revenue-raising measures, pointing to a meaningful improvement in debt affordability would also be credit positive. “The rating would likely be downgraded if Pakistan were to default on its debt obligations to private-sector creditors and the expected losses to creditors as a result of any restructuring were larger than consistent with a Caa3 rating,” it made it clear.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 17-2-2024

Digital export summit held between Pakistan and Turkiye

By Jamila Achakzai

Islamabad: Pakistan’s Embassy in Turkiye in collaboration with TUYAFED (Turkish federation of associations operating in the software and IT sector) organised a ‘Digital Export Summit’ in virtual format on 15 February 2024.

The thematic areas of the summit included fintech, gaming, telecommunications, cyber security, e-governance, A.I. & robotics, e-tourism, e-commerce, corporate software, defence technologies, energy and sustainability, health and education.

Apart from Consulate General of Pakistan in Istanbul, relevant institutions from Pakistan including Ministry of Commerce, Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP), Pakistan Software Export Board (PSEB), Pakistan IT Industry Association (PASHA), National Incubation Centre for Aerospace Technologies (NICAT) and others participated in the event. The summit was well attended by more than 150 software companies from both the countries as well as IT professionals. Ambassador Dr. Yousaf Junaid in his opening remarks thanked TUYAFED and the participants for their presence and highlighted the immense potential for bilateral trade and investment in the IT sector. Underscoring the importance of deepening cooperation in the IT sector, he said that both the countries would be able to boost IT exports as well as develop indigenous cutting-edge technologies. He added that this summit would play an important role in implementing the vision of strengthening technological cooperation between the two countries, envisioned by their leadership. His remarks were followed by presentations by Zeeshan Rehman, Chief Commercial

Officer PSEB and Khuram Rahat, Vice Chairman, PASHA.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 29-2-2024

British delegation visits Pakistan to bolster bilateral trade

Staff Correspondent

Islamabad: A delegation of 15 UK business representatives is visiting Pakistan to build links in the textiles, agri-food, handicrafts and home decoration sectors.

The delegation, led by the presidents of the Birmingham, West and North Yorkshire Chambers of Commerce, and the Asian Chamber of Commerce, will meet members of chambers of commerce in Karachi, Lahore, and Sialkot.

The mission is organised by the International Trade Centre (ITC) and funded by the UK Government. Delegates will also travel to the 'We Exhibit' trade fair - a trade-expo of women-led businesses in Sialkot which is funded by the UK government. The delegation will be in Pakistan until 3 March.

British Deputy High Commissioner and Director of Trade Pakistan, Sarah Mooney, said: "Trade between the UK and Pakistan is already growing at an impressive rate. This delegation clearly shows the interest in growing that, and the opportunities that lie ahead for increased trade and investment. The UK will continue to work with the Government of Pakistan, supporting changes that make trade fairer and easier for everyone."

Delegates will gain insights into Pakistan's business environment, and specific market requirements for importing from Pakistan. The mission will establish direct contacts between UK companies and potential suppliers in Pakistan, enhancing awareness of the vast business linkages possible between the two countries. ITC will also launch an export readiness handbook and two export guides to help access the UK market, available in both English and Urdu, to support Pakistani exporters in understanding UK market guidelines.

The UK is Pakistan's third-largest trade partner, with total trade being £4.3 billion, and the third biggest source of foreign direct investment. The UK's Development Countries Trading Scheme has opened up new avenues of trade between the UK and Pakistan by reducing tariffs and simplifying trade terms for 94% of Pakistani exports.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 20-2-2024

China ready to unleash growth potential

By Liu Zhihua

The Chinese economy will grow beyond 5 percent this year if the government adopts more proactive fiscal and monetary expansion to stimulate domestic investment and consumption, said Justin Yifu Lin, dean of Peking University's Institute of New Structural Economics.

In an exclusive interview with China Daily, Lin said that the nation's potential annual growth rate in the coming decade could be 8 percent or higher, rebutting theories that economic growth will continue to drop due to such factors as demographic changes and the so-called balance sheet recession, as experienced by Japan.

A balance sheet recession implies that households and enterprises have high levels of debt, resulting in sluggish consumption and investment, which in turn causes growth to either slow down or decline.

"I personally believe it would be possible for China to reach 5 percent to 5.5 percent (growth) this year," said Lin, who is also vice-chairman of the Committee on Economic Affairs of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

He attributed the challenges facing the Chinese economy primarily to the global economic slowdown and falling external demand. He said these factors dampen the confidence and investment sentiment of private enterprises — a major force in China's foreign trade sector — resulting in fewer jobs and discouraging consumption and investment.

"It would be desirable for the government to adopt more proactive countercyclical fiscal expansion, as well as monetary expansion, to provide more resources for supporting domestic investment and consumption," he said.

The government will be wise to invest more resources in areas where private enterprises are not eager to invest, such as basic research, green infrastructure and skills training, to promote technological innovations and industrial upgrades, said Lin, who is also former senior vice-president and chief economist of the World Bank.

He suggested that the nation adopt industrial policies to overcome market failures and support entrepreneurs, in order to turn sectors with potential comparative advantages into sectors with actual comparative advantages.

China is experiencing an uneven economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic, and many experts have been calling for stronger policy support to stimulate investment and consumption.

The People's Bank of China, the nation's central bank, cut the reserve requirement ratio by 0.5 percentage point on Feb 5 to inject liquidity of about 1 trillion yuan (\$140 billion) into the market. In October, the central

authorities announced that an additional 1 trillion yuan worth of special treasury bonds will be issued for specific projects, including those for flood control and agricultural land improvement. Lin said it is wrong to predict that China will never catch up with the United States in terms of economic scale based on arguments such as that the expansion of State-owned enterprises could weaken the private economy, or that China might relive Japan's experiences after the real estate bubble burst in the 1990s.

For instance, the government investment expansion in projects such as highways and 4G or 5G networks carried out by state-owned enterprises has not only created more jobs but has also provided solid infrastructure for private enterprises, including big internet platforms, to grow quickly, Lin said. Such measures have mitigated the spillover impact from the global trade slowdown since the global financial crisis in 2008 on the nation's private economy, he added.

China is unlikely to relive Japan's experiences and enter a period of balance sheet recession, as long as it promotes technological innovations and industrial upgrades, and creates more investment opportunities for enterprises, Lin said.

Japan abandoned its industrial policy approach under external pressure and failed to have major breakthroughs in basic research and technologies after the late 1990s, which is exactly what China should avoid while boosting investment and productivity, he said.

As long as China maintains dynamic economic growth and further opens its market, most companies and nations will have no reason to restrict their access to the Chinese market, he said, adding that the nation has reached a stage at which it is able to mobilize enough domestic capacity, resources and talent, when necessary, to achieve breakthroughs in certain areas.

Speaking on the aging issue in China, Lin said it is unnecessary to feel pessimistic. The number of working people is not as important as how effectively they provide their labor input, which largely depends on their education.

Statistics show that the country's effective labor input in general is actually on the rise, he said.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 26-2-2024

Interview: Chinese economy remains a global pillar -- Zambian expert

LUSAKA (Xinhua) -- China's economy has remained upbeat and China-proposed initiatives are beneficial to the world, a Zambian expert told Xinhua in an interview on Friday.

Kelvin Chisanga, a Lusaka-based social economist, said the Chinese economic model has made the country

resilient despite the continuous negative campaigns by some Western media.

"The Chinese economy has remained strongly upbeat," Chisanga said, adding that what China has done with its economy is impressive.

Noting that China has built a strong base of skills development, industrialization and strong partnerships, he said China remains a key participant in the global market.

Zambia and other African countries stand ready to further partner with China and achieve mutual benefit from China's robust economy, said the expert, adding that African countries should ensure that they find means of interplaying with China in various areas.

Chisanga said China has demonstrated its friendship and goodwill towards the continent through cooperation in various fields, such as infrastructure.

Citing China-proposed initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which were meant to interlink the world, he commended China for its future-oriented stance.

The Belt and Road cooperation, which focuses on connectivity, is a unique concept that will link the world and ensure enhanced global trade, he said. "China has built a very good industrial base which actually is catering for the entire global economy."

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 29-2-2024

2024 starts with positive signals in stable economic growth

By Yang Yang

China's light industry achieved a profit of 1.4 trillion yuan in 2023

China's light industry production continued to rebound with a steadily recovered market and fast growth of new driving force industries in 2023.

The operating revenue of China's light industry reached 22.2 trillion yuan (\$3.08 trillion) and the profit witnessed a year-on-year growth of 3.8 percent hitting 1.4 trillion yuan in 2023, according to China National Light Industry Council.

The rapid growing green and intelligent manufacturing light industry, represented by solar cells and household appliances, has become a new driving force to promote the high-quality development of light industry.

Battery manufacturing operating revenue increased 11.8 percent, with profit increasing by 12.4 percent in 2023.

The operating revenue and profit of home appliance manufacturing increased 7.0 percent and 12.2 percent, respectively, last year.

In 2023, the light industry accounted for 13.2 percent of the national industrial assets, achieving 16.7 percent of

the national industrial operating revenue and 18.1 percent of the profits, strongly supporting the stable development of the industrial economy.

China has made solid progress in consolidating and expanding its poverty alleviation efforts

In terms of promoting employment, the number of migrant workers employed has stabilized to more than 30 million per year in the past three years, reaching 33.97 million in 2023.

The Long March-8 Y3 carrier rocket has arrived at the Wenchang Space Launch Site

The Long March-8 Y3 carrier rocket tasked with launching the Queqiao 2 relay satellite arrived at the Wenchang Space Launch Center in Hainan province on Feb 22, said the China National Space Administration.

At present, the launch site facilities are in good condition, Queqiao 2 relay satellite mission preparation is in an orderly way and will be launched in the first half of this year.

Construction of Zhangzhou Nuclear Power "Hualong One" unit began

China has begun construction on the second phase of the Zhangzhou nuclear power project using Hualong One reactors, domestically developed third-generation reactors, in the city of Zhangzhou, East China's Fujian province.

The unit is expected to be completed and put into operation in 2028.

According to China National Nuclear Corporation, each Hualong One nuclear power unit generates more than 10 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity per year, which can meet the annual production demand and domestic electricity demand of 1 million people in moderately developed countries.

China's first BRICS cross-border e-commerce air cargo route exported more than 16 million items

Since its opening one year ago, the first domestic BRICS cross-border e-commerce air cargo route "Xiamen, China - Sao Paulo, Brazil" has a total of 234 round-trip flights, with more than 17,000 tons of goods imported and exported, according to Xiamen Customs.

Special employment service sessions for college graduates launched in many places

Starting from Feb 22, special service activities for college graduates have been successively launched across China including Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu, Jiangxi and Henan provinces, according to the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security.

Employers in various places provide positions in a variety of fields including technology, management, and

services, covering many industries such as medicine, technology, equipment manufacturing and commerce.

Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region economic aggregate reached 10.4 trillion yuan in 2023

The coordinated development of Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei has produced excellent results for ten years.

In 2023, the total economic output of the three regions reached 10.4 trillion yuan, 1.9 times that of 2013. The overall strength of the region continues to improve, and high-quality development is progressing rapidly and steadily.

Emerging industries resume work and production

More than 2,000 employees have returned to work at a company producing silicon rods and wafers, solar cells, photovoltaic modules, and supporting auxiliary materials in the Xining (National) Economic and Technological Development Zone, after the Spring Festival holiday.

Xining, capital of Qinghai province, is expected to focus on building a modern industrial system in 2024, releasing a series of proposed investment projects on new energy, new materials and bio-economy, with a total investment of nearly 250 billion yuan.

Currently, 14 key projects have been launched in Xining, such as new display industrial park, hydrogen fuel cell power system and green intelligent computing center.

China has fully resumed international cruise shipping

Carrying over 3,900 passengers, China's first domestically made large cruise ship, the Adora Magic City, docked at Shanghai Wusongkou International Cruise Terminal on Feb 22 morning, together with "Piano Land" and "Blue Dream Star".

Meanwhile, the visiting cruise ship "Europa" berthed at the Shanghai Port International Cruise Terminal on Feb 21. This is the first time for Shanghai cruise port to welcome four cruise ships at the same time since China fully resumed international cruise transport in 2023.

Since February, the Shanghai cruise port has docked 20 international cruise trips, with over 65,000 accumulative inbound and outbound passengers, which is nearly double the total number of inbound and outbound international cruise ship trips in January.

The numbers of inbound and outbound passengers reached 10,500 and 10,700 trips on Feb 9 and Feb 14, respectively, reaching the highest record in the past four years.

It is expected that there will be more than 380 inbound and outbound cruise ship trips at Shanghai cruise port in 2024.

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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 25-2-2024

Navy comes to aid of missile-hit merchant ship

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, A merchant vessel that caught fire following a missile strike in the Gulf of Aden has been provided assistance by the Navy.

MV Islander, bearing the flag of Palau, a small Island territory in the Pacific Ocean, had caught fire after an attack by a likely drone or missile on February 22.

A distress call had been broadcast by the ship. An Indian Navy warship deployed in the Gulf of Aden for maritime security operations arrived in the vicinity of the vessel in the afternoon of February 22, the Navy said today.

A naval explosives specialist team embarked the vessel and sanitised it for any residual risk. As per a US military's Central Command statement on Thursday, the Houthis fired two anti-ship ballistic missiles from southern Yemen into the Gulf of Aden. "The missiles impacted MV Islander," it said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 24-2-2024

India, Netherlands for synergy between defence, tech sectors

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, India and Netherlands are keen to encourage more interaction between defence industries and high-tech sectors like semiconductors and clean energy, said the Ministry of Defence after a bilateral meeting between Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his counterpart from Netherlands Kajsa Ollongren today.

The semiconductor push comes from the fact that Dutch company ASML is a global leader in making cutting-edge machines used in manufacturing semiconductor chips. India is looking at developing its own chip-making technology for the military and space sectors.

The MoD said the ministers discussed the possibilities for expanding their bilateral defence cooperation, particularly in maritime and industrial domains.

"They noted the increased interaction between the two navies and expressed keenness to work together to enhance maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region," the MoD said.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 22-2-2024

Security becoming more important in India-EU partnership, say EU's top diplomat

Rezaul H Laskar

Sannino said the European side wants an agreement that is ambitious and also opens up markets

Security has emerged as a more important element in the European Union (EU)-India partnership in light of

developments in the Indo-Pacific and the Red Sea and both sides are looking to work more closely on hybrid and maritime security, the EU's senior-most diplomat said on Wednesday.

Stefano Sannino, secretary general of the European External Action Service, said in an interview that the European side is interested in doing more with India to build on substantial cooperation in the maritime sector, including joint exercises and activities. He said the EU is looking "to replicate and to broaden" its coordinated maritime presence in regions such as the Gulf of Guinea and the northwestern Indian Ocean by working with India.

Recent developments in the Pacific, the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea – where there has been a string of attacks on merchant vessels by Yemen's Houthi rebels – have shown the weaknesses created by globalisation, especially when "some countries or some powers" attempt to use pressure to pursue their objectives, Sannino said.

"I think we have rediscovered the security dimension in a very clear way and now we are trying to go much deeper into the work that we can do together," he said, adding he would explore areas and modalities that can be used to strengthen this cooperation with India during his current visit.

While there has been considerable progress in various strands of the EU-India partnership, such as economic matters, negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) and technology cooperation, Sannino said both sides are starting to realise the need for "more solid relations when it comes to security" at a time of complex crises. This has led to the idea of doing "much more in areas like hybrid or cyber or maritime security", he said.

With India and the EU launching the seventh round of negotiations on a proposed FTA this week, Sannino said the European side wants an agreement that is ambitious and also opens up markets. The EU also wants the protection of investments. "I think that, as in all trade negotiations, it's [about] give and take. We must find the balance among the different sectors and different interests," he said.

While the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) or a tariff on carbon-intensive products isn't part of these negotiations, it is "part of the logic" to support an economic transition towards a green economy that is able to produce wealth while being sustainable for the environment, he said.

India is only the second country, after the US, with which the EU has established a Trade and Technology Council (TTC) to cooperate on cutting-edge technologies and Sannino said the digital pillar of this initiative is the one with enormous potential for collaboration.

"We think...in this area, we can do more, especially when it comes to critical technologies like quantum computing and artificial intelligence (AI), but also the

work that we are doing to imagine different ways of producing these technologies or products which are not yet there,” he said, adding this work dovetails with the EU’s efforts to reduce critical dependencies and diversify supply chains.

With Sannino’s visit to New Delhi coming days ahead of the second anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, he said it is “very difficult for any of us to say that the crisis...in Ukraine is not a global problem, not least because the consequences are felt globally”. The crisis represents an existential threat to Europe, which believes “Russian imperialism is something that is very dangerous for us”, he added.

“It’s a little bit difficult to say we are not interested in what is happening there. There is an effort being led by the Ukrainian authorities to push for a peace conference. There have been many meetings already, in which India has participated in a constructive way. We need to continue working in that direction,” Sannino said. At the same time, the EU will continue supporting Ukraine to achieve its goal of territorial integrity and to be a sovereign country “in charge of its own choices”.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 29-2-2024

India, US sign memorandum on law enforcement training

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, India and the US on Wednesday signed a memorandum of cooperation on law enforcement training between the US Federal Law Enforcement Training Centre and India’s Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel National Police Academy. This is a step to bolster bilateral efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism, drug trafficking, organised crime and ensure transportation security. The two sides also reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening the vibrant people-to-people ties between the two countries by taking steps to enable safe and legal migration, counter illegal migration, human trafficking, money laundering, cyber-crimes and misuse of the cyber domain for illegal activities, including terror-financing.

These discussions were held as part of the India-US Senior Officials’ Homeland Security Dialogue (HSD).

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 17-2-2024

Defence ministry clears procurement of military hardware worth Rs 84,560 crore

The procurement proposals were cleared by the defence acquisition council (DAC), headed by defence minister Rajnath Singh

Special Correspondent, New Delhi

The defence ministry on Friday cleared the procurement of military hardware worth Rs 84,560 crore, including multi-mission maritime aircraft, to boost the armed

forces’ combat, surveillance and air defence capabilities.

The procurement proposals were cleared by the defence acquisition council (DAC), headed by defence minister Rajnath Singh. It takes an estimated two to three years, at least, for a proposal approved by the DAC to fructify into a contract.

Among the procurements cleared are those of new-generation anti-tank mines and multi-mission maritime aircraft.

Medium-range maritime reconnaissance and multi-mission maritime aircraft can strengthen the navy’s and the coastguard’s surveillance and interdiction capabilities over the country’s vast maritime areas, the defence ministry said.

The air defence tactical control radar will strengthen, in particular, India’s capability to detect slow, small and low-flying targets. Flight-refueller aircraft will enhance the air force’s operational capabilities and reach, the defence ministry said.

Sources in the defence ministry said India would buy over a dozen maritime surveillance aircraft from aviation giant Airbus. “The Indian Navy will get the maximum aircraft while 2-3 will be given to the coastguard,” said a ministry official.

The procurement of medium-range maritime reconnaissance and multi-mission maritime aircraft will boost the navy’s capabilities, especially in the Indian Ocean region.

“India is worried about China’s growing influence in the Indian Ocean region. Over the past few years, the Chinese navy has been taking an assertive stand in the South China Sea and is challenging India’s domination in the region. These surveillance aircraft will add more teeth to the Indian Navy’s operation in the Indian Ocean region,” the official said.

In the wake of the recent spate of attacks on merchant vessels in the Arabian Sea, the Indian Navy has deployed over 10 warships with marine commandos in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden to deter piracy and drone strikes and is conducting enhanced maritime security operations.

“To enhance the operational efficiency and domination in the tactical battle area for engaging targets that are beyond visual line of sight by the mechanised forces, the AoN (approval of necessity) under Buy (Indian-IDDMM) category has been accorded for procurement of canister launched anti-armour loiter munition system,” the defence ministry said.

The defence ministry added: “To keep the Indian naval ships one step ahead of the threats posed by the adversaries, the AoN under Buy (Indian) category has been accorded for procurement of Active Towed Array Sonar having capabilities to operate at low frequencies and various depths for long range detections of adversary submarines. The AoN has also been accorded for procurement of heavyweight torpedoes for

enhancing the attacking capabilities of Kalvari Class submarines.”

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 16-2-2024

Naval prowess

Exercise signifies India's maritime leadership

INDIA is gearing up to host 'Milan 2024', a multilateral naval exercise that signifies international maritime cooperation. Since its inception in 1995, 'Milan' has evolved into a premier event showcasing India's maritime prowess and commitment to global security. Involving over 50 nations, including naval powers like the US, Japan, Australia and France, 'Milan 2024' will seek to address current maritime challenges. Attacks by Houthi rebels and Somali pirates in vital waterways like the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea have underscored the need for greater collaboration among nations.

India is playing a key role as a reliable security partner and advocate for maritime stability. The Indian Navy's engagement in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) demonstrates its emergence as a leading force. In 2022, the Navy joined the Bahrain-based Combined Maritime Forces, a US-led multinational naval partnership that aims to promote stability across international waters in the IOR; recently, India decided to become a full member of the grouping. India has also provided capacity-building assistance, platforms and training to countries in the region, thus helping them enhance their maritime capabilities. Gifting naval assets such as offshore patrol vessels and fast-attack craft to nations like Mauritius, the Seychelles and Sri Lanka underlines India's contribution to collaborative maritime governance. Notably, the hydrological surveys and joint Exclusive Economic Zone surveillance that India is carrying out in the ocean reflect its environmental stewardship.

'Milan' also serves as a platform for fostering trust and enhancing interoperability in naval activities among the participants. By promoting a rules-based maritime order, India is striving to ensure security on the high seas, vital for global stability and prosperity.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 18-2-2024

Exercise Vayu Shakti-24: IAF showcases its offensive capabilities at Pokhran

Rahul Singh

The Indian Air Force on Saturday showcased its offensive capabilities by day and night at the Pokhran air-to-ground range near Jaisalmer, with fighter jets carrying out precision strikes against simulated enemy aircraft and targets on the ground, including runways, bridges, ammunition dumps, radar sites, terror camps, thermal power plants and ordnance factories, to ensure superiority in the battlefield. Exercise Vayu Shakti-24, based on the theme Lightning Strike from the Sky, saw IAF's combat platforms drop around 50 tonnes of

ordnance in a span of two hours over an area measuring two square km.

The highlights of the exercise, which involved more than 120 aircraft, included Jaguar fighter jets destroying an 'ammunition dump' in a high-speed, low-level strike, Sukhoi-30s targeting a 'bridge', the Rafale deploying its Mica missile to down an enemy jet simulated by a drone, and Apache attack helicopters firing their Hellfire missiles to take out a 'tank formation.'

India-made platforms such as the light combat aircraft Tejas, Prachand light combat helicopters, and Akash and Samar surface-to-air missile systems were among the elements featured in the exercise.

Those present included chief of defence staff General Anil Chauhan, IAF chief Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari, navy chief Admiral R Hari Kumar, several top military officials and defence attaches of various countries.

"These attacks were delivered in multiple modes and directions, employing a variety of precision-guided munitions as well as conventional bombs and rockets," IAF said in a statement.

The Tejas fighters showcased their swing-role capability as they first engaged an aerial target and later a ground target. "Keeping up with the technological advancements in combat domain and the lessons learnt from recent conflicts, IAF also displayed a long-range unmanned drone, which destroyed a simulated enemy radar site with pinpoint accuracy," the statement said.

Vayu Shakti was last held at Pokhran in February 2019 when fighter planes targeted and destroyed simulated enemy sites, demonstrating IAF's capability to hit hard, hit fast and hit with precision.

The army's M777 ultra-light howitzers also fired at targets at Vayu Shakti-24. Chinook helicopters carried these 155 mm/39-calibre howitzers to the Pokhran range as an underslung load.

The demonstration of IAF's capabilities included MiG-29s and Mirage 2000s pounding targets with bombs, Rudra helicopters destroying tanks with their rockets and the C-130J special operations aircraft carrying out an assault landing.

The night element of the exercise involved the Jaguars, Sukhoi-30s, Prachand helicopters, Akash missile system and the M777 howitzers.

"The night events displayed for the first time the capabilities of the indigenous Prachand wherein it neutralised the designated target with rockets. This was followed by a Jaguar and Su-30 dropping heavy calibre and area weapons showcasing the strategic bombing capability of the IAF," the statement said.

Remotely piloted aircraft carried out the damage assessment of all targets that was live-streamed to the operations centre and the audience.

The line-up of events included Garud commandos slithering down the Mi-17 helicopter to carry out an 'urban intervention', displaying their prowess in

operations aimed at clearing terror hideouts. Combat support operations by transport aircraft included a containerised delivery system drop by a C-17 heavy-lift aircraft.

This year will be a busy one for IAF. In the coming months, it will host a mega exercise that is expected to bring together 12 global air forces, with the focus being on improving interoperability, imbibing best practices from one another and boosting military cooperation among the participating countries. Named Tarang Shakti, it will be the biggest multi-nation air exercise to be conducted on Indian soil and will involve fighter jets, transport aircraft, helicopters, mid-air refuellers, airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft, and unmanned systems.

To be sure, while Tarang Shakti will be the biggest multilateral exercise to be conducted in India, IAF has taken part in several such drills on foreign soil.

This year IAF will also conduct its pan-India and the largest-of-its-kind exercise, Gagan Shakti, the officials said. In the 2018 edition of Gagan Shakti, the air force clocked more than 11,000 sorties during the two-phase air manoeuvres that saw the concentration of the air force's deployed assets move from the western sector to the eastern front in less than 48 hours.

It sought to test the IAF's readiness and stamina for a two-front war with China and Pakistan. From deep strikes to air dominance and maritime operations to air defence, the IAF practised every manoeuvre in the book in its preparation for a short and intense war.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 26-2-2024

India-Japan military drill starts in Rajasthan

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, The fifth edition of joint military exercise 'Dharma Guardian' between Indian and Japanese land forces commenced at the Mahajan Field Firing Ranges in Rajasthan. The two-week drill is an annual exercise conducted alternatively in India and Japan.

Each contingent comprised 40 personnel. The Japanese contingent is being represented by troops from the 34th Infantry Regiment and the one from the Indian Army is being represented by a battalion from the Rajputana Rifles.

The aim of the exercise is to foster military cooperation and enhance combined capabilities to execute joint operations in semi-urban environment under the United Nations Charter. The event would focus on high degree of physical fitness, joint planning, joint tactical drills and basics of special arms skills. Tactical drills to be practised during the exercise will include establishing temporary operating base; creating an intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance grid; setting up a mobile vehicle checkpoint; executing cordon and search operations in a 'hostile village'; and carrying out helicopter-borne operations.

Lt General Togashi Yuichi, Commanding General, Eastern Army, Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, is also scheduled to visit India.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 19-2-2024

In pictures: Indian Air Force displays growing combat prowess at Pokhran desert

The IAF demonstrated its combat prowess in a massive day and night exercise featuring missiles, drones and over 120 aircraft including fighter jets and attack helicopters in a breathtaking display of its air power close to the frontier with Pakistan

Web Desk

IAF's Apache helicopter fires a missile during the Vayu Shakti 2024 exercise at Pokhran Range, in Jaisalmer district. The IAF also showcased its rising capabilities in rapid deployment of combat assets by airlifting weapons like M-777 ultra-light howitzers and other military platforms. A fire power demonstration during Vayu Shakti 2024 at Pokhran Range. The mega air exercise came amid the lingering border row with China in eastern Ladakh. Members of the Indian Air Force's Akash Ganga team during Vayu Shakti 2024. In keeping with the exercise's theme 'Lightning Strike from the Sky', frontline fighter jets including the Rafale, Su-30 MKI, MiG-29, Mirage-2000 and Tejas attacked and destroyed simulated enemy targets on ground and in the air with deadly precision. An Indian Air Force (IAF) aircraft releases flares. Night events displayed for the first time the capabilities of indigenous light combat helicopter 'Prachand' wherein it neutralised designated target with rockets. Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan and Chief of the Air Staff VR Chaudhari during Vayu Shakti 2024 at Pokhran Range. Upholding IAF's firm commitment to 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', the indigenously built Tejas aircraft showcased its swing-role capability and destroyed an aerial target with a missile, followed by the engagement of a ground target with bombs. Articles being dropped through parachutes during a fire power demonstration at the Vayu Shakti 2024. During the display, approximately 50 tonnes of ordnance was dropped in a short span of two hours over an area of two square km.

THE HINDU, DELHI 28-2-2024

Burden of power: On India's astronauts and the Indian space policy

Scientific exploration, not superpower status, should drive India's space programme

Prasanth Balakrishnan Nair, Ajit Krishnan, Angad Pratap and Shubhanshu Shukla — these Air Force pilots constitute the final shortlist of candidates from among whom India's astronauts for its human spaceflight mission, a.k.a. Gaganyaan, will be selected. The announcement, by Prime Minister Narendra Modi

during an official visit to Kerala, fills the last real unknown about the ambitious mission, which aims to send an Indian crew to low-earth orbit onboard an Indian rocket. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has signalled that, setting aside the risk of unexpected delays, it expects to conduct two test flights of the human-rated Launch Vehicle Mark-3 rocket in 2024 and 2025 and the crewed launch in 2025. The Union Cabinet approved Gaganyaan in 2018 at a cost of 10,000 crore. Since then, the ISRO centres and their collaborators in industry and academia have worked to bring the mission's various components together while also negotiating delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic and ISRO's commercial commitments. Now, with the astronauts' names in the open, India is truly in the last mile.

It would be naive to believe an undertaking of this scale can be completely free of political capture, but Gaganyaan cannot be altogether politically motivated either. Among other things, the Indian Space Policy 2023 requires ISRO to "carry out applied research and development of newer systems so as to maintain India's edge in ... human spaceflight" and to "... develop a long term road-map for sustained human presence in space". ISRO has also flown a bevy of technological, research, and commercial missions with sufficient support from the Centre to render them immune to political accountability, and Gaganyaan has been no different. But going ahead, it should be different, with justification that is amenable to public scrutiny and debate while seeding a culture of space exploration that is truly democratic, rather than being motivated seemingly by geopolitical aspirations. Similarly, while a road map is being set — accommodating Mr. Modi's "directive" to ISRO to land an Indian on the moon by 2040 — the endeavour must be to give Gaganyans present and future an identity rooted less in "India's edge", which when maintained for its own sake becomes a vacuous thing, and more in the fundamental act of creating new scientific and societal value. Other countries, including China, may be technologically ahead, but India must keep the focus on scientific exploration and expanding human horizons, and not on achieving some 'space superpower' status.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 29-2-2024

A new frontier for India's space programme

Space exploration and manned flight is the next logical step forward — driven by the need to build this capability to meet future requirements

Four decades after Rakesh Sharma reached space aboard the Soviet spacecraft Soyuz T-11, Gaganyaan, India's maiden crewed space mission, is a step closer to lift-off. Ironically, a human space flight target for the Indian space programme has been questioned since its initial stages. Often cited is Vikram Sarabhai's

statement in the 1960s that India doesn't harbour "the fantasy" of competing with rich nations in space exploration, and that its space programme's goals were fundamentally Earth-bound and utilitarian, focusing on deploying technology to address "real problems of society".

Four decades after Rakesh Sharma reached space aboard the Soviet spacecraft Soyuz T-11, Gaganyaan, India's maiden crewed space mission, is a step closer to lift-off. Ironically, a human space flight target for the Indian space programme has been questioned since its initial stages. Often cited is Vikram Sarabhai's statement in the 1960s that India doesn't harbour "the fantasy" of competing with rich nations in space exploration, and that its space programme's goals were fundamentally Earth-bound and utilitarian, focusing on deploying technology to address "real problems of society".

Sarabhai's brief, though, has long been met. The Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) has demonstrated its prowess in most space applications, from meteorology to communications to remote sensing and navigation. This makes space exploration and manned flight the next logical step forward — driven as much by the need to build this capability to meet future requirements across domains as by nationalistic pride. India's Mars Orbiter and lunar landing missions made for an impressive start, though the US and the erstwhile USSR did this successfully decades earlier.

Signatories of the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, which forbade commercial exploitation of resources outside Earth, are gradually walking away from the agreement. The focus now is on arrangements that prop the interests of these powers. The US's Artemis Accords paves the way for commercial exploitation of the Moon. China and Russia on the other hand are planning to make their International Lunar Research Station functional by 2036. India signed the Artemis Accords last year, but it is not difficult to envisage a situation where it is every nation for itself. Against such a backdrop, India can't be diffident in developing capabilities across space domains.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 29-2-2024

Express View on Gaganyaan: Sky's not the limit

Preparing to join their names in history books with Rakesh Sharma, the air force captain who became the first Indian in space in 1984, are Group Captain Prasanth Balakrishnan Nair, Group Captain Ajit Krishnan, Group Captain Angad Pratap, and Wing Commander Shubhanshu Shukla — the astronaut-designates for India's first human space flight mission, Gaganyaan. Having trained in anonymity for the last four years, they received their "astronaut wings" on February 27 at the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre in Thumba, Kerala, from Prime Minister Narendra Modi,

who described them as “the four forces” representing the dreams of 1.4 billion Indians. What may have seemed like a dream almost too big, has acquired a human dimension.

Announced in 2018, Gaganyaan is one of India’s most ambitious space programmes. The task of sending humans into the vast unknown and bringing them back safely is more expensive and challenging than the Mars and Moon missions. A successful execution would put India in the company of the US, Russia and China. As stated on the ISRO website, the short-term goal is to demonstrate human spaceflight to Low Earth Orbit, while the long-term goal is to lay the foundation for a “sustained Indian human space exploration programme”. Success in its ultimate objective — proving that India is capable of indigenously developing this complex technology — would be a huge boost for ISRO.

The excitement around Gaganyaan is not only a sign of how much ISRO’s public profile has grown over the last few years, but also the increasing reach and scale of its ambitions. The success of recent missions like Mangalyaan and Chandrayaan, while exhilarating in themselves, can become the start of something larger. The demonstrations of technological capabilities must be built on, if India wishes to eventually operate in the same league as the US or China. This can only happen if these successes help move towards an ecosystem that is able to compete with the most advanced. Opening up of the sector to private parties and allowing 100 per cent foreign direct investment are steps in the right direction. Indeed, a similar ambitious thrust is needed across sectors of scientific research. On several indicators, such as the share of GDP spent on research and development, nurturing universities to be centres for R&D and number of patents filed, India lags woefully. If putting Indians in space using made-in-India technology will be a dream come true, making Indian science and technology competitive at the highest level will mean the realisation of many more.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 21-2-2024

India for joint ventures in defence manufacturing, Says Pranay Verma

UNB, Dhaka

Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma yesterday said India is willing to share wide-spectrum capabilities in defence manufacturing with Bangladesh.

He also proposed elevating bilateral defence cooperation by building joint ventures in defence manufacturing.

Verma was speaking at an event on “Seminar on Indian Defence Equipment - SIDE 2024” hosted by the High Commission of India in Dhaka.

He described SIDE 2024 as a reflection of Indian defence industry’s interest in partnering with

Bangladesh and taking India-Bangladesh defence cooperation to the next level, including by utilising the Defence Line of Credit of USD 500 million extended by the Indian government.

Principal Staff Officer of Bangladesh Armed Forces Division Lt Gen MR Shameem also spoke at the event.

A number of premier defence manufacturing companies of India, from both public and private sectors, participated in the event.

At the seminar, they also gave presentations showcasing a range of “Made in India” defence equipment, technology and platforms.

The seminar was also attended by representatives from Bangladesh Armed Forces as well as paramilitary and police forces.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 29-2-2024

BD, US air exercise ends

Staff Correspondent

The ten-day-long collaborative endeavor, Exercise Cope South-2024 involving Bangladesh Air Force and Pacific Air Force, USA, organized by Bangladesh Air Force came to an end at Bangladesh Air Force Base Bangabandhu on Wednesday.

Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Operations) Air Vice Marshal Hasan Mahmood Khan, attended the closing ceremony as chief guest. He delivered the closing address among the invited guests and participants from both the nations joined in a photo session, according to ISPR.

Major General Erich C. Novak, head of delegation also put forth his remarks on behalf of Pacific Air Force, USA. Charge d’Affaires of the US Embassy, Ms Helen LaFave joined the ceremony as Special Guest. Besides, officials from the US attended the ceremony.

Embassy, high-ranking officials from all three services as well as Bangladesh Armed Forces Division, participants from both the forces, representatives from Bangladesh Police attended the programme.

In Exercise Cope South-2024, one C-130J and one AN-32 transport aircraft from Bangladesh Air Force and two C-130J transport aircraft from the Pacific Air Force, USA participated alongside 250 members from Bangladesh Air Force and 77 members from Pacific Air Force, USA. Besides, 12 paratroopers from Bangladesh Air Force, 30 paratroopers from Bangladesh Army, and 40 paratroopers from Bangladesh Navy actively participated in the Exercise.

Exercise Cope South is designed to enhance BAF capability as well as to ensure maximum utilization of BAF transport aircraft in combating disaster and natural calamities.

This collaborative exercise is aimed to enhance interoperability between both the forces, facilitate exchange of training, standardization of maintenance of transport aircraft, assessment of functional suitability of available equipment along with identification of future

equipment requirements for improving capability through different activities.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 18-2-2024

Air Force Day on March 2

The Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) will celebrate its 73rd Anniversary on March 2. Upholding its rich tradition, the “Air Force Day” will be the premier event in its calendar.

This year’s celebrations will commence with a “Pichcha Mal Pooja” on the eve of March 1 at the Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara with the participation of the Commander and a cross-section of officers and other ranks and civilians. Additionally, arrangements have been made to hold Catholic, Islamic and Hindu religious ceremonies.

The formal Air Force Day celebrations will be held at SLAF Headquarters on March 2 with all SLAF establishments under the leadership of Commander of the Air Force, Air Marshal Udeni Rajapaksa. The press briefing for the “73rd Air Force Anniversary” celebration and “Air Tattoo and Exhibition-2024” was held on Wednesday (February 14), chaired by the Commander of the Air Force at the Air Force Headquarters, Sri Jayewardenepura. He said unlike the previous years, this year the SLAF has decided to celebrate the 73rd anniversary in the Northern Province, focusing on the future minds of the nation. This initiative, named “Wings of Friendship,” aims to promote quality education and environmental sustainability, aligned with the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Under this initiative, several sub-projects have been planned for implementation in the Northern Province. This includes the development or renovation of 73 deserving schools in Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu with an estimated total cost of Rs.100 million. Additionally, 73,000 books will be donated to schoolchildren under the program “Magen Pothak Uthurata,” with an estimated cost of Rs. 25 million. Another sub-project involves planting 73,000 saplings in the Northern Province.

The “Guwan Hamuda Papedi Sawariya -2024” will be conducted for the 25th consecutive year, in line with the 73rd Anniversary of the SLAF. Scheduled to start from Colombo March 3 and end at Jaffna on March 7, the total distance covered by the men’s race is over 650 km, while the women’s race covers close to 100 km.

The amateur “Air Force Commander’s Cup Challenge Friendly Football Tournament-2024” commenced on February 10 at the Kilinochchi – Northern Province Sports Complex. Eleven sports clubs representing the Northern Province, registered under the Sri Lanka Football Federation, are competing in this tournament. The primary objective is to identify young talented footballers and bring them to the national level.

The “Air Tattoo – 2024” educational and technical exhibition will be held from March 6 to 10 at Muttraveli Stadium, Jaffna.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 21-2-2024

Multinational peacekeeping exercise begins in Kathmandu

A total of 1,125 soldiers from 19 countries will attend the pre-deployment training for UN peacekeeping missions.

Post Report

KATHMANDU, Shanti Prayas IV, a multinational peacekeeping exercise, commenced at the Nepal Army pavilion, Tundikhel in Kathmandu on Tuesday. Inaugurating the event, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal said peacekeepers face heightened and multiple threats due to the complex and multi-layered nature of conflicts.

Adapting to this changing scenario is a must as peacekeeping operations have evolved into complex politico-military-humanitarian efforts demanding a greater understanding and preparation on the part of peacekeepers, he said.

“It has thus become crucial to reassess how we deliver peace amid new complex challenges to maintain trust and legitimacy of the UN Peacekeeping.”

Speaking at the event, Chief of Army Staff Prabhu Ram Sharma said Nepal organised three editions of the exercise in 2002, 2013 and 2017. He expressed his belief that the exercise would be fruitful in promoting mutual relations and professionalism among the peacekeepers.

Likewise, Rachel Schiller, the deputy assistant secretary for Programmes and Operations in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs at the US Department of State, thanked the Nepal government, the Nepal Army and the Birendra Peace Operations Training Centre for hosting the exercise.

“It is because of your enduring commitment to peacekeeping that we are here today and I want to recognise Nepal for its outstanding peacekeeping accomplishments”, she said.

“The United States remains deeply committed to the success of UN peacekeeping, which is why we are not only the largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping, but we are also the largest bilateral capacity building partner globally through the Global Peace Operations Initiative through which we have committed over \$1.5 billion since 2005, to enhance the capacity of partner countries to prepare, deploy and sustain peacekeepers in UN and regional peacekeeping missions.”

The training, supported by the US Global Peace Operation Initiative, is being undertaken in collaboration with the US Army, Nepal Army Directorate of Public Relations and Information said in a statement.

A total of 1,125 soldiers from 19 countries—Bangladesh, Fiji, Ghana, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Uruguay, the USA, Australia, Canada, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea and Vietnam—are participating in the exercise.

The training for soldiers before their deployment in various peacekeeping missions will be conducted at the Kavrepalanchok-based Birendra Peace Operations Training Centre till March 4.

Nepal is the largest troops-contributing nation for the UN peacekeeping missions. Nepal started participating in the United Nations peace efforts in 1958 by sending five observers to the United Nations Observer Group in Lebanon (UNOGIL), Lebanon. Purano Gorakh Battalion was sent as the first Nepali contingent in the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF-II), Egypt in 1974, according to the Nepal Army.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 25-2-2024

Military diplomacy in focus amid mega peacekeeping exercise

As US Indo-Pacific commander arrives, high-level Chinese military delegation is due to visit Kathmandu in March.

Anil Giri

Kathmandu, With powerful nations sending high-level defence delegations to Kathmandu, Nepal's military diplomacy is in full swing.

Nepal Army is hosting the fourth edition of Exercise Shanti Prayas, which brings more than 1,100 military personnel from 17 nations. Admiral John Aquilino, who leads the United States Indo-Pacific Command, arrived in Kathmandu via New Delhi on Saturday to observe the exercise sponsored by the Nepali and US armies.

Shanti Prayas is a multinational peacekeeping exercise hosted rotationally by the Nepal Army and the US Indo-Pacific Command. Observers say having good military-to-military relations contributes to the improvement of overall bilateral and multilateral relations between Nepal and respective countries.

Adm Aquilino is scheduled to visit the Birendra Peace Operations Training Centre (BPOTC) in Panchkhal on Sunday, said Nepal Army spokesperson Brigadier General Krishna Prasad Bhandari. He is also scheduled to meet President Ramchandra Paudel, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Purna Bahadur Khadka, Chief of the Army Staff General Prabhu Ram Sharma and senior government and military officials, on Monday, according to the sources.

In New Delhi, Aquilino addressed the Raisina Dialogue and held talks with the External Affairs Minister of India S Jaishankar, among other Indian officials. Jaishankar wrote about his meeting with the admiral on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter). The

minister said that he had a good conversation with Aquilino on strategic affairs.

Prime Minister Dahal inaugurated the Exercise Shanti Prayas-IV on Tuesday. The event will continue till March 4. Rachel Schiller, the US deputy assistant secretary for programs and operations under the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, attended during the opening ceremony.

Shanti Prayas—IV is designed to improve peacekeeping capabilities, strengthen military-to-military cooperation, and enhance the core peacekeeping competencies of all participants in accordance with the UN doctrines. The militaries of Nepal, the US, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Fiji, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Uruguay, and Vietnam are participating in the effort, according to the Nepal Army. After the Shanti Prayas concludes, a high-level delegation led by a lieutenant general of the Chinese People's Liberation Army is due to arrive in Kathmandu. The agenda of the March visit is yet to be fixed, according to sources at the Ministry of Defence.

There are some pending issues with China like military procurement, installation of an ammunition plant for the Nepal Army, another joint military exercise, training for Nepali Army officials, and military-to-military cooperation, sources privy to the developments said.

"The Chinese side has informed us that the PLA delegation will be led by a lieutenant general. The two sides are finalising agendas and issues," said a defence official informed on the matter.

Chinese Major General Yue Ande of the Tibet Military Command of the PLA visited Kathmandu in August last year. In talks held with Gen Sharma, the two sides discussed holding the pending joint military drills, among other issues.

When Nepal Army chief Sharma visited China in October-November last year to attend the Beijing-Xiangshan Forum, he held talks with Chief of Staff Gen Liu Zhenli of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Chinese Army and visited Chinese Army's different units and training centres in Xi'an, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

However, Nepal Army spokesperson Brig Gen Bhandari said that he has no information about the PLA delegation's Nepal visit.

Moreover, several Indian Army officials and delegations have also visited Kathmandu and held talks with General Sharma and other senior military and government officials.

In the context of the Indo-Pacific, Shanti Prayas is a remarkable event at a time when regional bodies like SAARC have stalled, said retired Maj Gen Purna Silwal.

The participation of India and other democratic countries in this particular multilateral military exercise is significant.

“In terms of participation, the event this year is the biggest of its kind in Nepal. As the army is the country’s only stable institution, all major and middle powers want to have good relations with it,” said Silwal. “If the relations between the armies are good, other relations will automatically improve. This will further stabilise and cement bilateral ties.”

Nepal Army is capable of handling geopolitical rivalry, and such military exercises and arrivals of individual military delegations from various countries are not targeted against any nation, Silwal added.

After Nepal became the highest troops contributing country to UN peacekeeping, this is another milestone for us, said Silwal.

“This achievement will boost our confidence.”

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 21-2-2024

No Plan B for JCPOA, Russia insists

TEHRAN - Mikhail Ulyanov, the Russian ambassador to the Vienna-based international organizations, has reiterated Moscow’s position that there is no alternative to the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), the official name for the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

In a post on Tuesday, he wrote, “1 year ago Western analysts and often officials speculated a lot about unknown Plan B to settle the Iranian nuclear problem. Russia always expressed the view that there was no realistic Plan B and that there was no alternative to the #JCPOA. Now we can see that Russia was right.”

Following the signing of the JCPOA in 2015 intended to lift unjust sanctions on Iran, the Islamic Republic fulfilled its commitments flawlessly as a responsible country, which was confirmed in 16 reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency. However, after Donald Trump entered the White House, the sanctions that had been lifted under the JCPOA were reinstated unilaterally on May 8, 2018.

In 2018, Iran activated the dispute resolution mechanism within the framework of the Joint Commission of the JCPOA at the level of foreign ministers. As a result, the JCPOA parties issued a statement outlining 11 commitments to compensate for the economic damages caused by the unilateral actions of the United States.

However, the unbalanced implementation of this agreement on one side and pressures resulting from the imposition and intensification of unilateral U.S. sanctions led Iran to halt the voluntary nuclear commitments step by step one year after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 2231.

On May 8, 2019, the Supreme National Security Council of Iran decided to take measures to cease the gradual implementation of nuclear commitments and gave a 60-day opportunity for diplomacy.

Iran fulfilled all its commitments under this agreement for one year after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA

to give European countries time to compensate for Washington’s exit. However, since European countries did not fulfill their promises, Iran reduced its commitments under the JCPOA in several steps.

The Biden administration condemned the previous administration’s unilateral move to pull out of the JCPOA but followed the maximum pressure policy similar to that of Donald Trump.

Negotiations to resume the implementation of the JCPOA were held in eight rounds with representatives of the 4+1 group in Vienna.

The U.S. delegation also indirectly participated in the talks. However, due to factors such as inconsistency in behavior, procrastination in decision-making, excessive demands, and presenting new requests by the U.S., the negotiations were stalled.

Iran has always stated its readiness to conclude a stable and reliable agreement that guarantees sanctions removal in a way that eliminates the subject as a leverage for future use against Iran.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 20-2-2024

Iran’s nuclear activities transparent since day one: nuclear official

By Mona Hojat Ansari

TEHRAN – In an exclusive interview with the Tehran Times, the Deputy head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) rejected claims that the country’s nuclear program is not fully transparent.

“We have made it clear since day one that our nuclear activities are nothing but peaceful. Every time the IAEA asked us for clarifications we provided them with answers. Nothing has changed. Tell us which part of our nuclear program is not transparent and we will prove that it is. As the Leader of the Islamic Revolution once said, ‘The West knows very well that it’s lying about our nuclear activities’,” Pejman Shirmardi stated.

The official made the remarks after the UN nuclear watchdog accused Iran of not being completely transparent with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

“Iran is presenting a face which is not entirely transparent when it comes to its nuclear activities. Of course, this increases dangers,” Rafael Mariano Grossi said during a summit earlier this month.

Grossi’s comments seemed to be in response to a former Iranian official’s remarks, who said that Iran had pieces for a nuclear weapon in its hands.

The IAEA Director-General’s reaction to the comments of an ex-official in Iran comes as he has chosen to ignore Israel’s alarming nuclear threats against Palestinians in the past months. Israel’s so-called heritage minister has suggested twice since the start of the war in Gaza that the enclave should be destroyed with the help of nuclear weapons.

The threat was an open admission to Israel’s possession of a nuclear arsenal. IAEA inspectors have never sought

to inspect Israel's nuclear sites despite repeated calls from regional countries that feel insecure due to the regime's warmongering policies.

The AEOI deputy head also commented on reports of Iran and Saudi Arabia's cooperation in the nuclear field, saying Tehran is always ready to transfer its knowledge to regional and friendly countries. "Our nuclear program is focused on improving the everyday lives of people. That's why we are always willing to share our knowledge and provide other countries with services or products," the official added.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 16-2-2024

Naval chief oversees conduct of Exercise Seaspark 2024

Exercise Seaspark 2024 is a major maritime exercise of PN which is regularly conducted after every two years on two-force concept

By Muhammad Anis

ISLAMABAD: Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Naveed Ashraf on Thursday visited the naval ships at sea, creek areas on the coastal belt of Sindh and coastal areas of Balochistan to oversee the conduct of Exercise Seaspark 2024 and meet the troops deployed in the exercise, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said.

Exercise Seaspark 2024 is a major maritime exercise of Pakistan Navy which is regularly conducted after every two years on two-force concept, which includes Blue Force (own force) and Orange Force (enemy force).

The purpose of the exercise is to plan and conduct naval operations as per wartime procedures to check operational readiness, major mobilisation of personnel and practice coordination between various elements of Pakistan Navy to undertake complex operations.

During the operations at sea, Pakistan Navy warships and aircraft also detected Indian Navy ships, submarines and aircraft, attempting to covertly observe the exercise and interpret Pakistan Navy warplanes. Accordingly, necessary safeguards were taken by the Pakistan Navy.

During his visit at the Maritime Headquarters in Karachi, the naval chief was given a briefing by the Orange and Blue Naval Force commanders on the conduct of operations by respective forces.

The naval chief also visited Ketī Bandar Post and Battalion Headquarters of Pak Marines at Shah Bandar, where he was briefed on combat readiness for the defence of creek areas which constitute the south eastern maritime boundary with India.

The naval chief interacted with troops deployed in difficult marshy areas and appreciated their devotion and high morale.

He also visited Jinnah Naval Base at Ormara and naval ships operating at sea and expressed his satisfaction on the professional excellence, high morale and perpetual readiness of Pakistan Navy to ensure impregnable maritime defence of motherland.

The naval chief reaffirmed the resolve of Pakistan Navy to safeguard national maritime interest.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 29-2-2024

Pakistanis among UN peacekeepers pulling out from Congo

AFP

KAMANYOLA: The United Nations on Wednesday kicked off the withdrawal of MONUSCO peacekeeping forces from the Democratic Republic of Congo by handing over a first UN base to national police, an *AFP* team saw.

During an official ceremony at the Kamanyola base, close to the Rwandan and Burundian borders, the flags of the UN and Pakistan, the country of origin of the peacekeepers in charge, were replaced by those of the DRC.

The DRC demanded the withdrawal despite UN concerns about rampant violence in the east of the country.

Kinshasa considers the UN force to be ineffective in protecting civilians from the armed groups and militias that have plagued the east of the vast country for three decades.

The UN Security Council voted in December to accede to Kinshasa's demand for a gradual pullout by the MONUSCO mission, which arrived in 1999. The UN force currently fields around 13,500 soldiers and 2,000 police across the three eastern provinces of Ituri, South Kivu and North Kivu.

The "disengagement plan" is due to take place in three phases with completion depending on regular assessments. Phase one is to see the departure of military peacekeepers from South Kivu by the end of April and civilian staff by June 30. Before May, the UN force is to leave its 14 bases in the province and hand them over to DRC security forces.

It's a "historic moment", interim MONUSCO commander in chief Diouf Khar said in a speech. "We began with Kamanyola because there is stability here which allows us to leave," the head of MONUSCO Bintou Keita told reporters.

After South Kivu, the second and third pullout phases will cover Ituri and North Kivu, with regular assessments of progress.

DRC Foreign Minister Christophe Lutundula has made it clear he wants the withdrawal completed by the end of this year, though the UN Security Council has not fixed a date.

'Security vacuum'

The UN has insisted the DRC security forces must be reinforced and take care of civilians at the same time as MONUSCO pulls out.

Around six million people have been displaced by the fighting in DRC.

In Kamanyola, with a population of about 100,000, opinions appeared divided on the eve of the first step in

the pullout. Ombeni Ntaboba, head of a local youth council, said he was not too concerned. Every evening, he said, “we see them out in their armoured vehicles around the Ruzizi plain”, where armed groups operate along the border.

“But the level of insecurity is still the same, with armed robberies and kidnappings.”

“We salute the Congolese government’s decision,” said Mibonda Shingire, a rights activist, who admitted fearing the impact on the local economy because of the many people employed by MONUSCO.

Others, like Joe Wendo, said they were worried about a “security vacuum” once the Pakistani troops deployed to Kamanyola have gone.

“Their presence at least protected us from the Rwandan invaders,” he said.

The withdrawal comes with North Kivu facing the resurgent Tutsi-led M23 rebels who have seized swathes of territory. Intense fighting resumed last month around the city of Goma, North Kivu’s capital. But local people shout down the UN troops more than they praise them.

And MONUSCO has recently felt the need to point out that it “supports Congo’s armed forces... defends its positions... facilitates secure passage for civilians”.

“The departure of the MONUSCO blue helmets concerns us, at a time when the country is at war with the rebels backed by our Rwandan neighbours,” said Beatrice Tubatunziye, who leads a development association in Kamanyola. She said she wanted to believe that Congolese forces “will quickly be able to fill the void”.

Kinshasa, the United Nations and Western countries say Rwanda supports M23 in a bid to control vast mineral resources in the region, an allegation Kigali denies.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 29-2-2024

China expected to set moderate defense budget growth for 2024

Military spending considers modernization needs, security environment, economic situation: experts

By Liu Xuanzun

China will likely continue its trend of moderately increasing its defense budget in 2024, prompted by the country's needs in military modernization, the challenging security environment, and the recovering economic situation, experts predicted shortly before the figure's anticipated announcement next week.

A draft for the defense budget for the year 2024 is scheduled to be released in Beijing at the opening of the annual session of the National People's Congress (NPC), the country's top legislature, on Tuesday.

China's defense expenditure for 2023 was set to 1.5537 trillion yuan (\$224.79 billion), an increase of 7.2 percent compared with the figure of 2022. The country has maintained single-digit growth in its annual defense budget for eight consecutive years since 2016.

The gradual increase of China's defense budget is a trend, said Fu Qianshao, a Chinese military expert.

Fu told the Global Times that China is undergoing an important period of military modernization, which includes replacing legacy weapons and equipment with modern ones, and enhancing personnel training to operate them.

In 2024, China's third aircraft carrier, the electromagnetic catapults-equipped Fujian, is expected to conduct test voyages, and other advanced military assets like the J-20 fighter jets will likely continue to ramp up production, observers said.

To master these new weapons and equipment, intensive training exercises are needed, and the training requires funding, Fu said.

China has not fought a war in decades, and only through realistic combat training can its force maintain the capability to safeguard national sovereignty, territorial integrity and development interests, and to serve as a creditable deterrent in preventing wars, analysts said, noting that another aspect accompanied by military modernization is the recruitment and the welfare of personnel, as more highly educated talents are required to operate the more advanced weapons and equipment.

The security environments around China and in the world have been deteriorating, and China's military spending must also take these factors into account, another Chinese military expert who requested anonymity told the Global Times.

Over the past year in the South China Sea, the US instigated the Philippines to provoke China's islands and reefs and gained access to additional military bases in the Philippines to enhance its military encirclement on China at the southern end of the so-called first island chain.

Rallying its allies and partners, including Australia and Japan, the US continued to frequently carry out close-in reconnaissance and hold provocative exercises on China's doorstep in attempts to contain China's development.

Japan, taking advantage of the US strategy in containing China, also showed signs of revival of its right-wing militarism, as it broke away from its post-war self-defense-only principle and began procuring and deploying missiles that can attack other countries.

In the Taiwan Straits, the recent election of secessionist Lai Ching-te as the island of Taiwan's next regional leader added fuel to the flames lit by the Democratic Progressive Party authorities' years of "Taiwan independence" separatist attempts, which are backed by the US that repeatedly sold arms to the island and sent warships through the Straits.

Elsewhere around the world, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict marked the degradation of the global security environment.

A strong Chinese military supported by sufficient defense budget is vital to the strategic balance in the

world and to the deterrence of conflict in the Asia-Pacific region, as it contributes to peace and stability in the region and the world, the expert said.

Experts pointed out that China's defense spending is closely related to the country's economic situation, and with the country recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is normal that the defense budget will also rise.

According to publicly available information, China's military expenditure takes about 1.3 percent of its GDP in recent years, and this is a very low figure compared with other major military powers, as well as the world average.

Restrained figure

Reuters reported that the US President Joe Biden in December 2023 signed into law the fiscal 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, authorizing a record \$886 billion in annual military spending, which is nearly four times the figure of China's defense budget in 2023.

The US' military expenditure as a share of GDP was 3.49 percent in 2023, and the guideline figure for NATO members is 2 percent, according to data published by NATO. These are also significantly higher than China's figure of approximately 1.3 percent.

Fu said that China's military spending increase is restrained, and the goal is to safeguard national sovereignty, territorial integrity and security, as well as peace and stability in the entire region.

Unlike the US, the top military spender in the world that pursues global hegemony, China pursues a national defense strategy that is defensive in nature, Fu stressed.

"China is not interested in engaging in an arms race with the US," Fu said.

China also regularly conducts UN peacekeeping missions, naval escorts in the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia, as well as disaster relief and humanitarian aid operations, which are public security goods provided to the international community that build peace and stability.

Enough funding can also provide the foundation for the Chinese military to fulfill its international responsibilities and obligations, experts said.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 27-2-2024 **China to make around 100 orbital** **launches in 2024: blue paper**

By Deng Xiaoci

China's space development is set to witness new milestones in 2024 with around 100 orbital launches expected to take place, setting a new record and accelerating the networking and construction of multiple satellite constellations, according to the annual blue paper released by China's state-owned space giant China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) on Monday.

The CASC blue paper (2023) pointed out that as the year 2024 marks the 75th anniversary of the founding of

the People's Republic of China, it will be a crucial year for fully implementing the spirit of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, vigorously achieving the goals and tasks of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25), and accelerating the construction of a space power.

According to a statement the CASC sent to the Global Times on Monday, it has scheduled nearly 70 orbital launches for 2024, aiming to send some 290 spacecraft into space. Among the missions, newly-developed Long March-6C and Long March-12 carrier rockets will execute their maiden flight missions.

The China Space Station has entered the normal operation stage and within 2024, there will be two cargo spacecraft missions, two manned spaceflight missions and two return missions, per the CASC.

China's first space launch site especially for commercial use is also expected to have its first launch mission in 2024.

Also, China's much-anticipated Phase-4 lunar probe mission will see new progress including the launch of the Queqiao-2 relay satellite and Chang'e-6 mission, which is expected to carry out the world's first lunar sample returning mission in the South Pole-Aitken Basin on the far side of the moon.

Satellites for civilian use purposes including the ocean salinity detection satellite, electromagnetic monitoring satellite 02, and the China-French astronomical satellite (SVOM), will also make their launches in 2024, CASC said in the statement, while stressing that work to push forward the building of the CASC new-generation remote sensing satellite is being accelerated.

The blue paper also reviewed the country's space development in 2023, saying that 67 launch missions were carried out, ranking second in the world, and 221 spacecraft were developed and launched, breaking Chinese records for launch frequency and spacecraft quantity. Among them, the Long March series of carrier rockets successfully launched 47 times with a perfect success rate, breaking through 500 launches cumulatively, and other commercial rockets launched 20 times.

Looking back on the past year, China's space industry has implemented high-density launch missions in an orderly manner with a high success rate, and the number of spacecraft developed and launched has rapidly increased, with a significant improvement in development capabilities, the CASC said.

In terms of international cooperation, China's space industry has carried out various forms of international exchanges such as exchanges, discussions, data sharing, technical cooperation, application services, and space culture education, promoting the high-quality development of the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative, and contributing to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

In 2024, CASC will maintain a high-intensity research and development mission, comprehensively advancing projects such as manned lunar exploration, deep space exploration, and the development of over 200 spacecraft including the new generation of near-Earth manned spacecraft, Chang'e 7 lunar probe, Tianwen 2 probe, and geostationary orbit microwave detection satellites, while vowing to guarantee the production of over 230 carrier rockets and the implementation of various commercial aerospace contracts and satellite export agreements.

The China Manned Space Agency (CMSA) on Saturday unveiled the names of the new vehicles for future manned lunar exploration missions. The new manned spacecraft is named Mengzhou, which means "dream vessel". The lunar lander is named Lanyue, which means "embracing the moon".

China plans to land its taikonauts on the moon before 2030 to carry out scientific exploration.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 24-2-2024

China's strongest rocket Long March-5 successfully sends satellite into orbit, embarking on high-frequency launching period in coming years

By Deng Xiaoci

Long March-5, China's most powerful carrier rocket in commission, thundered into the sky from the Wenchang Space Launch Site in South China's Hainan Province at around 7:30 pm, successfully sending the communication technology experiment-11 satellite into preset orbit. This marks China's first space launch in the Year of the Dragon.

The Friday mission marked the seventh flight of China's strongest rocket model and the 11th orbital launching flight of the Long March-5 family, which also includes a shorter variant Long March-5B. The Global Times has learned from the rocket developers with the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology (CALT) Friday that the Long March-5 is projected to enter a high-frequency launch period over the next two years.

Lou Luliang, deputy chief designer of the Long March-5 with the CALT, disclosed to the Global Times that it has been scheduled that the Long March-5 will see four launch missions this year, and will maintain this frequency in the coming years, which is intense for a sizable rocket model. According to Lou, with a 5-meter diameter core stage, the Long March-5 is the largest Chinese rocket in active service, and it also comes with boosters of 3.35-meter diameter (about the same size of the Long March-3B rocket's first and second stages). "The workload of general assembly and testing for a Long March-5 is equivalent to 2.5 to 3 times of that for a conventional rocket model such as the ones of the Long March-3A family."

It is also worth noting that it has been only 70 days since the last orbital launch by the Long March-5, which

was on December 15, 2023. In the last mission, the Long March-5 has for the first time used an 18.5-meter-long fairing, setting a new height benchmark for China's carrier rockets in commission. The longer fairing enhances the loading capacity and mission adaptability of Long March-5, and also makes its height exceed that of all Long March launch vehicles currently commissioned. According to Lou, the launch interval between the two missions is 70 days, but the actual working time in-between is only 43 days. Via the Friday mission, the launch site's preparation time for the Long March-5 has been significantly reduced from over two months to 43 days, and the working time of the launch site will be reduced to 30 days next year, which will leave margin for the implementation of subsequent missions, Lou said.

The Long March-5 made its maiden flight in 2016 and resumed flight operation on December 27, 2019, and in the following three years, the rocket model has successfully launched Tianwen-1 Mars probe, Chang'e-5 lunar probe, the China Space Station Tianhe core module, Wentian and Mengtian lab module into space.

Although 2023 witnessed only one launch mission by the Long March-5, the CALT revealed that relevant mission insiders are already preparing for the 2024 and 2025 frequent mission schedules.

The Long March-5 is expected to engage in four spaceflight missions this year and five next year, these high-frequency launches will probably become a new normal in the coming years, Lou noted.

A senior space expert based in Beijing, who requested not to be named, told the Global Times on Friday that the high-frequency launch by the Long March-5 large rocket carries great significance, as it shows not only that our rocket's launch efficiency is greatly boosted, but also that there is more and more large payload or spacecraft in China, meaning our capabilities of entering space and developing space is growingly robust.

The high-frequency launches of the Long March-5 carrier rocket not only demonstrate the reliability of this series of rockets in terms of performance and technology, but also indicate the increasing scope of China's space exploration projects, Wei Dongxu, a space watcher and TV commentator, told the Global Times on Friday. The Long March-5 plays a crucial role in the construction and subsequent support of China Space Station, as well as serving as a vital carrier for projects such as the Chang'e lunar exploration. Its success represents a leap forward in Chinese carrier rocket technology and will support further space exploration endeavors in the future, Wei said.

"This also underscores the ongoing development of China's carrier rocket technology, with plans to build new-generation carrier rockets with greater thrust based on the successful experiences of the Long March-5, as the Long March-5 has accumulated valuable technological and design experience, he noted.