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THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 29-3-2024

Pak wants to renew trade ties with India. What should Modi govt do?

Shishir Gupta

There is no better way for Pakistan to cut down its losses and then tell the world that it has come down from its high horse

Pakistan's foreign minister Ishaq Dar on March 23 said that his country was considering renewing trade ties with India.

Why did he make the statement?

The answer lies in the simple fact that trade with Pakistan from the Indian side still continues through third parties, i.e Dubai, Singapore and other ports. In the current year itself, India has exported nearly \$1.10 billion worth of goods that includes petroleum products, sugar and pharmaceuticals to Pakistan. The imports from Pakistan are negligible.

Two years ago, Pakistan lifted the sanction on import of life saving drugs from India. Currently, that is the only direct trade that takes place and that too because India believes in humanitarian assistance to any neighbourhood country.

Pakistan decided to downgrade ties with India and cut all trade ties after New Delhi abrogated Article 370 and Article 35(A) on Jammu and Kashmir. India removed the 'Most Favoured Nation' status granted to Pakistan after Pak-based terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammed struck in Pulwama on February 14, 2019, killing 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel in a suicide bomb attack.

What is interesting is that on the day Ishaq Dar made the statement, Pakistan prime minister Shehbaz Sharif reiterated that India and Pakistan can only move forward after sorting out the issue of J&K. His statement was reflected by the statement and tweets of a junior diplomat based in India who said that India and Pakistan needed to sort out all outstanding bilateral issues including J&K.

As far as India is concerned, the only issue it has with Pakistan is terrorism as there is no issue of J&K whose status is finally settled for good.

Why is Pakistan wanting to do trade with India?

There is a lot of pressure from the Pakistani business community to do trade as they are paying extra duties while getting imports from India via third countries. Pakistan's economy is in dire straits and the external debts and liabilities have almost doubled to \$125 billion.

Its domestic debt has increased sixfolds in nominal terms since 2011. For financial year 2024, Pakistan faces an estimated debt maturity of \$49.5 billion with 30 per cent as interest payments.

Pakistan has mere \$8 billion in foreign currency reserves. It battles 33 per cent inflation while the US dollar-Pak rupee exchange rate is touching the triple

century mark. Pakistan is running for economic cover from the IMF.

Under the circumstances, there is no better way for Pakistan to cut down its losses and then tell the world that it has come down from its high horse and is willing to resume trade ties with India. But the problem is that Pakistan does not speak in one language, and this was evident in the statement made by Shehbaz Sharif who wanted to move a joint resolution on Kashmir and Palestine on March 3 in the National Assembly.

Till such time, the Pakistan Army which runs the country, comes out clearly whether it wants to have trade ties with India or not, all this is a matter of public speculation.

What should India do now?

When Pakistan says it wants to resume trade ties with India while wanting the J&K issue to be settled, this line does not hold good for New Delhi. India wants bilateral ties with Pakistan only after terrorism issue is settled and Islamabad takes action against anti-India terror groups like Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Toiba that are based in the neighbouring country.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 29-3-2024

An expert explains: What will it take to resume India-Pakistan trade?

Why has Pakistan's new Foreign Minister spoken of the possibility of resuming trade with India? What is the history of trade between the two countries, and what will it take to resume the commerce?

Written by C. Raja Mohan

On March 23, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Muhammad Ishaq Dar said his country may "seriously examine" the question of resuming trade with India.

Pakistan stopped trade after the constitutional changes in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019. Like other aspects of the India-Pak relationship, trade too has been impacted by Islamabad's hard line on Kashmir and its support for terrorism. The dire state of the Pakistani economy, however, has raised hopes for a change in Pakistan's approach. But New Delhi will keep its fingers crossed.

What explains the timing of Pakistani minister Dar's comments?

Over the years, Dar has headed several economic ministries, and he served as finance minister in the previous Shehbaz Sharif government (2022-23). He has closely watched the deepening of Pakistan's economic crisis, and he was involved in the country's negotiations for financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

A second factor is pressure from the business community. One of the conditions imposed by the IMF was the raising of energy prices, but this hurt production within Pakistan. Imports have come down because of the low price of the Pakistani rupee.

Dar mentioned that trade between India and Pakistan is already taking place through Dubai or other countries.

This raises costs, and the logic of efficiency and geography demand a resumption of direct trade.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's relative power position vis-à-vis India has declined. Its GDP is now 10 times smaller than India's. This will continue to widen amid Pakistan's low growth rates.

Pakistan's relationships with Afghanistan and Iran have become tense. In fact, Pakistan's ties with India are more stable than its western frontier with Afghanistan and Iran.

How seriously should Dar's comments be taken?

The comments by the Pakistani minister show the growing imperative of improving economic ties with India. But there is no consensus in Pakistan on this issue.

In 2021, Pakistan allowed trade in sugar and cotton but reversed the decision in a day — an episode that spotlights the complexity of engaging with India in Pakistan. Back-channel negotiations between the Indian security establishment and the Pakistan Army at the time led to a renewal of the 2003 ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC).

There was also a proposal to initiate confidence-building measures. The resumption of trade in sugar and cotton was considered sensible since Pakistan needed them and India was in a position to supply. Then Prime Minister Imran Khan, who was also Commerce Minister, supported the proposal — but flipped when it went before the Cabinet after he faced opposition from the hardliners. This happened even though then Pakistan Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa seemed interested in relaxing the tensions.

What are the challenges to normalisation of India-Pakistan trade?

The leaders of the new coalition government, President Asif Ali Zardari of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), have traditionally favoured trade with India. But given that PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, who was Foreign Minister in 2022-23, has taken a hard line against India in public statements over the last few years, it is not clear if his party will support trading with India.

Then there is the Pakistan Army. When Dar talked about consulting "stakeholders" on trade, he was referring to the military. Army Chief General Syed Asim Munir has not said very much about India so far — so it is not known where he stands.

Further, Pakistan has put preconditions on talks with India, demanding the reversal of the decision on Article 370 — which will not happen. The question is, how does Pakistan climb down from the high horse without losing face?

India too would not want to trade without major steps from Pakistan on curbing terrorism. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has frequently said trade and terrorism cannot go together.

In the 1990s, Pakistan was on the offensive in demanding Indian concessions on Kashmir. Things were out of control in Kashmir then, and India was under pressure to yield. Today, India's position is stronger, and the current government is not going to make any concessions.

The ball then is in Pakistan's court; and there is no domestic consensus on how to reset ties with India. This is the problem: trade with India makes economic sense for Pakistan. But the politics of doing the right thing are quite hard in Pakistan.

What is the broad history of India-Pakistan trade?

After the wars of 1965 and 1971, trade links were largely cut off. The borders were shut, and became heavily militarised, which is part of the reason trade volumes between the two countries never grew significantly. Much of the real trade took place via other countries.

Agreements such as the SAARC Preferential Trade Agreement (1993) were signed, but Pakistan was not interested in trade with India. It demanded that India must resolve the Kashmir issue before the normalisation of economic ties.

In the 2010s, the Manmohan Singh-led government tried very hard to improve trade ties. The World Bank was helping negotiate a petroleum agreement that would allow Pakistan to buy fuel across the border from the Jalandhar refinery. There were also talks about trading in electricity. However, the Pakistan Army pulled the plug every time.

During the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit of 2014, member countries agreed to open borders to facilitate the movement of trucks and trains. But the Pakistan Army stepped in again to block the agreement.

Meanwhile, India's position on Kashmir has strengthened. The abolition of Article 370 shocked Pakistan. Its efforts to get China to do something about it in the UN Security Council did not work. Pakistan's best friends in the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have not criticised India, and have maintained close ties with New Delhi.

Pakistan recognises that it has put itself in a tight corner. The logic of the economy demands that it changes its hard line. But domestic political inertia makes it difficult for Pakistan to do so.

How soon could India and Pakistan move towards better economic ties?

With Lok Sabha elections set to begin in less than a month, it is not likely anything major will happen immediately between New Delhi and Islamabad.

All successful India-Pakistan negotiations have taken place in private, and the next three months offer room for quiet diplomacy by the two sides. One immediate step could be for Pakistan to say it will send its High Commissioner back. The UAE, in particular, has been encouraging Pakistan to talk to India. Reports have

suggested that the UAE played a major role in getting the two countries together in 2021.

Who benefits from a resumption of bilateral trade?

For Pakistan, it makes sense to reboot its economy in partnership with India.

Under the Manmohan Singh government, there was an attempt at serious negotiations to sort out trade-related issues. Members of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) travelled to Pakistan in 2012 to negotiate mutually beneficial terms of trade.

The Zardari government had announced its intent to give India the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to India under World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules, meaning it would not discriminate against New Delhi as a trade partner. But the Pakistan Army applied the brakes.

In India, traders in Punjab have been reported as saying they want to trade with Pakistan. Lowering the tensions with Pakistan will surely be beneficial for India too. But Pakistan does not appear ready to break with its past policies. When it does, India should be ready to reciprocate.

Dr C Raja Mohan is Contributing Editor on international affairs for The Indian Express and visiting research professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 27-3-2024

'PoK an integral part of India, every Indian's goal to get it back': Amit Shah

HT News Desk

Amit Shah said the people of Kashmir Valley were given a wrong interpretation of Article 370 which now stands nullified after its abrogation.

Union home minister Amit Shah on Tuesday reiterated that Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) is an integral part of India, and both the Muslims and Hindus living there are Indians.

"The BJP and the entire Parliament believe that POK believes the POK is an integral part of India. The Muslims and the Hindus living in POK are also Indians and the land also belongs to India which has been illegally occupied by Pakistan. It is the goal of every Indian, every Kashmiri to get it back," Shah said in an interview to the JK Media Group.

Shah said that the people of Kashmir Valley were given a wrong interpretation of Article 370 which now stands nullified after its abrogation.

"It was always said that once Article 370 is abrogated, the culture, language and existence of Kashmiriyat will be threatened. It is now five years after the abrogation but nothing such has happened. Kashmiris are free today, the importance of the Kashmiri language, and food culture have enhanced and tourists are flocking to the tourist spots of Kashmir," the minister said.

Shah spoke on several myths that revolved around Article 370. "It was also said that lakhs of people would

move to Kashmir threatening the very existence of Kashmiriyat that myth too stands busted today," he said. Union Home Minister Amit Shah said that the main goal of Narendra Modi government is to 'liberate' Kashmir from the 'claws of dynastic politics'.

'Separatist ideology was shaped under shadows of Article 370': Shah

"Under the shadows of Article 370, a separatist ideology was shaped and the youths of Jammu and Kashmir were dragged into terrorism. Pakistan misused this situation and in the last 4 decades, more than 40,000 youths lost their lives," Shah said.

"But today Jammu and Kashmir is heading on the path of progress. Terrorism is seeing its fag end, stone-pelting has completely stopped. An anti-corruption bureau has been formed to stop corruption and people's money is reaching the people," the Union minister added.

Shah slams Cong, NC & PDP

Recalling Prime Minister Narendra Modi's massive rally in J&K, Shah said that the goal of the Centre is not to strengthen BJP in the Union territory but to 'liberate' Kashmir from 'the claws of dynastic politics'.

"The three dynastic parties namely the Congress, the National Congress and the PDP have always hindered the percolation of democracy at the grassroots. Until Modi ji became the prime minister, the panchayat elections were not held in Jammu and Kashmir. But today more than 30,000 representatives are participating in the democratic process," he said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 18-3-2024

Arunachal Pradesh 'inherent part of China's territory', claims Chinese military

Makes the remarks in response to India's enhancement of its military readiness through the Sela Tunnel in Arunachal Pradesh, according to a report posted on the Chinese Defence Ministry's website

PTI, Beijing, The Chinese military has reiterated its claim over Arunachal Pradesh, calling the area an "inherent part of China's territory", days after India rejected Beijing's objection to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the state.

Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang said the southern part of Xizang (the Chinese name for Tibet) is an inherent part of China's territory, and Beijing "never acknowledges and firmly opposes" the "so-called Arunachal Pradesh illegally established by India", official media here reported.

Zhang made the remarks in response to India's enhancement of its military readiness through the Sela Tunnel in Arunachal Pradesh, according to a report posted on the Chinese Defence Ministry's website on Friday.

China, which claims Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet, routinely objects to Indian leaders' visits to the state to highlight its claims. Beijing has also named the area as Zangnan.

India has repeatedly rejected China's territorial claims over Arunachal Pradesh, asserting that the state is an integral part of the country. New Delhi has also dismissed Beijing's move to assign "invented" names to the area, saying it did not alter the reality.

On March 9, Prime Minister Modi dedicated to the nation the Sela Tunnel built at an altitude of 13,000 feet in Arunachal Pradesh that will provide all-weather connectivity to strategically located Tawang and is expected to ensure better movement of troops along the frontier region.

The Rs 825 crore tunnel, constructed on the road connecting Assam's Tezpur to West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, is being billed as the longest bi-lane road tunnel in the world at such an altitude.

The Sela Tunnel will provide for better movement of troops and weaponry to various forward locations along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China, according to Indian military officials.

"The Indian side's actions contradict the efforts made by both sides to ease border situations and are not conducive to maintaining peace and tranquillity in the border areas," Zhang said, referring to Modi's visit.

He said that the current border situation is generally stable, with effective diplomatic and military communication between the two sides on border issues of common concern.

Zhang urged India to "stop actions that complicate the border issue and to earnestly maintain peace and stability in the border area".

He "stressed" that the Chinese military remains highly alert in defending national sovereignty and territorial integrity, according to the report.

Zhang's reaction follows China's foreign ministry spokesperson's remark on Monday about lodging a diplomatic protest with India over Modi's recent visit to Arunachal Pradesh.

India "strongly rejected" China's objection and asserted that the state "was, is, and will" always be an integral and inalienable part of India.

External affairs ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said in New Delhi that the Chinese side was made aware of this "consistent position" on several occasions.

Jaiswal said China's objection to such visits will not change the reality that Arunachal Pradesh "was, is, and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India".

"Indian leaders visit Arunachal Pradesh from time to time, as they visit other states of India. Objecting to such visits or India's developmental projects does not stand to reason," he said.

"Further, it will not change the reality that the state of Arunachal Pradesh was, is, and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India," Jaiswal said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 20-3-2024

'Absurd, baseless': India counters China's new claim over Arunachal

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has hit out at China's Defence Ministry for its "absurd claims over the territory of the Indian state of Arunachal", and underlined that "repeating baseless arguments in this regard does not lend such claims any validity".

Chinese Defence Ministry spokesperson Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang had said that the southern part of Xizang (the Chinese name for Tibet) is an inherent part of China's territory. Beijing "never acknowledges and firmly opposes" the "so-called Arunachal Pradesh illegally established by India", he added, as quoted by the official media in Beijing.

The Chinese military's comments followed those of its foreign office and were targeting PM Narendra Modi's visit to Arunachal Pradesh earlier this month.

"Repeating baseless arguments in this regard does not lend such claims any validity. Arunachal Pradesh was, is and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India. Its people will continue to benefit from our development programmes and infrastructure projects," said MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal.

Earlier this month, PM Modi addressed the "Viksit Bharat Viksit North-East Programme" in Itanagar and laid the foundation stone for multiple development projects worth about Rs 55,600 crore in Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh.

Last week, South Block had hit back at Beijing for objecting to Prime Minister Modi's Arunachal Pradesh visit. "Indian leaders visit Arunachal Pradesh from time to time, as they visit other states of India. Objecting to such visits or India's developmental projects does not stand to reason," Jaiswal had then said.

Inalienable part

Arunachal Pradesh was, is and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India. — Randhir Jaiswal, MEA spokesperson

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 29-3-2024

India, China hold another round of diplomatic talks on border standoff

Rezaul H Laskar

India and China held yet another round of diplomatic talks on achieving disengagement in the Ladakh sector of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) though there were no signs of any breakthrough in resolving the standoff that began almost four years ago.

The 15th meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) on India-China Border Affairs since the standoff began in May 2020 was held in Beijing on Wednesday, according to a

statement issued by the external affairs ministry on Thursday.

“The two sides had an in-depth exchange of views on how to achieve complete disengagement and resolve the remaining issues along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Western Sector of India-China border areas,” the statement said.

“In the interim, both sides agreed to maintain regular contact through diplomatic and military channels and on the need to uphold peace and tranquillity on the ground in the border areas in accordance with existing bilateral agreements and protocols,” it added.

The statement made no reference to forward movement in addressing friction points at Demchok and Depsang, where troops from both sides remain deployed in close proximity to the LAC. Dozens of rounds of diplomatic and military talks have resulted in the two sides withdrawing troops from other friction points such as the north and south banks of Pangong Tso Lake, Gogra and Hot Springs.

The joint secretary (East Asia) from the external affairs ministry led the Indian delegation while the Chinese side was led by the director general of the boundary and oceanic department of the foreign ministry.

The last meeting of the WMCC was held on November 30 last year and it too had not produced any significant outcome. This was followed by the 21st round of talks between Indian and Chinese corps commanders at the Chushul-Moldo border meeting point on February 19.

After the standoff began in May 2020, the WMCC first met virtually in June the same year, shortly after a brutal clash in Galwan Valley left 20 Indian soldiers and at least four Chinese troops dead. The first fatalities on the LAC in 45 years took bilateral relations to the lowest ebb since the 1962 border war between India and China. Both sides now have some 60,000 troops each arrayed along the LAC in Ladakh sector.

India has consistently said that the overall bilateral relationship cannot be normalised without the restoration of peace and tranquillity along the LAC. China’s leadership, however, has been contending that the two sides are moving towards a normalised management of the border issue, which should be put in an “appropriate place” while the two countries take forward relations in other spheres such as trade.

External affairs minister S Jaishankar on Wednesday said that restoring normalcy in ties with China hinges on the conventional deployment of troops along the LAC, which will also shape the future relationship with Beijing.

“My first duty to Indians is to secure the border. I can never compromise on that,” Jaishankar said while responding to a question on India-China relations during an interaction with the Indian diaspora in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur.

“We’re still negotiating with the Chinese. I talk to my counterpart... Our military commanders negotiate with

each other. But we are very clear that we had an agreement. There is a Line of Actual Control, we have a tradition of not bringing troops to that line. Both of us have bases some distance away, which is our traditional deployment place and we want that normalcy,” he said. Normalcy in troop deployment will be the “basis for the relationship going forward and we’ve been very, very honest with the Chinese about it”, Jaishankar said.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 21-3-2024

Recognise Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory: United States on China's claim

The remarks came days after the Chinese military reiterated its claim over the state following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit there

PTI, Washington

The United States recognises Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory and strongly opposes any unilateral attempts by China to advance its territorial claims across the Line of Actual Control, a senior Biden administration official has said, days after the Chinese military reiterated its claim over the state following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit there.

Earlier this week, Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang said that the southern part of Xizang (the Chinese name for Tibet) is an inherent part of China's territory, and Beijing "never acknowledges and firmly opposes" the "so-called Arunachal Pradesh illegally established by India".

China, which claims Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet, routinely objects to Indian leaders' visits to the state to highlight its claims. Beijing has also named the area Zangnan.

On March 9, Prime Minister Modi dedicated to the nation the Sela Tunnel built at an altitude of 13,000 feet in Arunachal Pradesh that will provide all-weather connectivity to strategically located Tawang and is expected to ensure better movement of troops along the frontier region.

Speaking at his daily press conference on Wednesday, State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said, "The United States recognises Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory and we strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to advance territorial claims by incursions or encroachments, military or civilian, across the Line of Actual Control." India has repeatedly rejected China's territorial claims over Arunachal Pradesh, asserting that the state is an integral part of the country. New Delhi has also dismissed Beijing's move to assign "invented" names to the area, saying it did not alter the reality.

The Ministry of External Affairs on Tuesday said it has noted the latest comments made by the spokesperson of the Chinese Defence Ministry "advancing absurd claims" over the territory of Arunachal Pradesh and asserted that the state "was, is and will always be" an integral and inalienable part of India.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 22-3-2024
**US: Working with India to hold those
 behind Pannun plot accountable**

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, A senior United States diplomat has said the allegations of Indian government's involvement in the alleged plot to murder a Khalistani separatist in New York was a "serious issue" in the bilateral ties with India, and Washington was working with New Delhi to hold accountable those behind the plot.

"We take this in the administration incredibly seriously and have raised it at the highest levels with India. We are at the moment working with India to encourage it to hold accountable those responsible for this terrible crime," Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu told members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee during a Congressional hearing on Wednesday.

Although the briefing was on Pakistan, Congressman Dean Phillips from Minnesota asked if sanctions similar to those placed on more than 500 individuals relating to the killing of Alexie Navalny in Russia were being considered for those believed to be behind the plot to kill Pannun. Lu said the India itself has announced a committee of inquiry to look into this matter and the US was asking them to "work quickly and transparently to make sure justice is done".

A day after the comments made by the State Department's point person for South Asia, a western media house claimed that the Indian government's probe report has found the involvement of "rogue officials" in the plot and that one of the officers was no longer with the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).

THE HINDU, DELHI 29-3-2024

**Easily provoked: On India's internal
 affairs and foreign comments**

*India is not showing confidence about its own
 democratic record*

New Delhi and Washington appear to be squaring off for a fight over the U.S. expressing its concerns about the Modi government's actions ahead of the general election. After the U.S. State Department spokesperson first made a comment on the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) summoned the acting Deputy Chief of the U.S. mission in Delhi and sternly called on the U.S. to desist from interfering in India's internal affairs. A dressing down was also handed to a German diplomat for a similar statement by Germany. However, while the German government appeared to tone down its remarks subsequently, the U.S. administration seems to have doubled down — repeating statements on the need for "fair, transparent, timely legal processes", and adding the freezing of the Congress Party's accounts during the election campaign amongst its concerns, prompting yet

another rebuke. The U.S.'s statements, galling for the government, are not new, and its concerns over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, farmers' protests, actions against NGOs, and legal action against Opposition politicians have been growing. The Modi government may wish to introspect about whether any of these interventions are valid concerns, and it may be of significance to probe whether this brinkmanship is a symptom of a larger problem in the India-U.S. relationship. Since the U.S. announced an indictment into an alleged assassination plot against a Khalistani separatist and India critic, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, claiming a link to a top Indian national security official, the quality of public engagement appears to have suffered a setback, even though trade, technology sharing, and military and strategic cooperation remain strong. The decision by U.S. President Joe Biden to decline India's invitation as Republic Day chief guest and to attend the Quad summit, and the cancellation of U.S. NSA Jake Sullivan's visit, even as the post of Indian Ambassador to Washington lies vacant, merit close examination.

Given the kerfuffle over Mr. Kejriwal's arrest, New Delhi has a few choices: it can choose to continue this high-decibel, public and unseemly spat; it can pay the U.S. back in the same coin by commenting on its internal developments; or it can refuse to be provoked. The last option may seem the least attractive to this government, which has made a habit of pugilistic public diplomacy, but in fact would come from a place of strength and security. Global leadership, of the kind that India aspires to, requires broad shoulders, and a thick skin when it comes to criticism, along with a quiet confidence that its democratic record should speak for itself.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 18-3-2024

**India, Maldives review military
 withdrawal at core group meet**

Second batch of troops to leave by April 10

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, The third meeting of the India-Maldives high-level core group was held in Male on Sunday, where the two sides reviewed the ongoing deputation of Indian technical personnel to enable continued operation of Indian aviation platforms that provide humanitarian services to people of Maldives, said a statement from the Ministry of External Affairs.

Maldives' poll: Ballot boxes to be placed in India

The ballot boxes for Maldives' upcoming parliamentary elections will be placed in India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia, after around 11,000 Maldivians submitted re-registration requests to relocate their polling stations, the country's election commission announced on Sunday. The six-day window for people to relocate their voting stations for the April 21 parliamentary elections

expired on Saturday, media reports said, citing an Elections Commission notification.

They reviewed the ongoing process of replacing Indian military personnel from the island nation with Male saying the second group will leave by April 10.

“During the meeting, both sides reviewed the ongoing deputation of Indian technical personnel to enable continued operation of Indian aviation platforms that provide humanitarian and medevac services to the people of the Maldives,” it said.

The discussions focused on efforts to boost bilateral trade and investment and enhance people-to-people linkages between India and the Maldives. “Both sides continued their discussions on wide-ranging issues related to bilateral cooperation. This inter alia included expediting the implementation of ongoing development cooperation projects through regular convening of joint monitoring mechanisms, efforts to boost bilateral trade and investment, and enhancing people-to-people linkages through capacity-building and travel,” the MEA release said.

The first batch of Indian military personnel in the Maldives has been replaced by technical personnel, Randhir Jaiswal, spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs, had said on Friday.

It was agreed to hold the next meeting of the high-level core group in New Delhi on a mutually convenient date.

The second high-level core group meeting was held in February.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 23-3-2024

Now, Maldives turns to ‘ally’

India for debt relief

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, Though there has been no letup in the new Maldivian regime’s efforts to replace Indian economic and security assistance, country’s President Mohamed Muizzu has called India “closest ally” in an effort to earn debt relief on some of the \$4 billion it owes to New Delhi.

Muizzu is keen that India should reschedule some of the loans. In an interview to a local media house, he said:

“It is not nice to dismiss or disregard aid from one country to another as useless” while stating differences over stationing of military personnel was the “only matter of discord” with India. Muizzu put the blame on previous governments for having taken “hefty loans” due to which “the conditions we have inherited are such that there are very large loans taken from India. Hence, we are holding discussions to explore leniencies in the repayment of these loans”.

“Instead of halting any ongoing projects... to proceed with them at speed, so I see no reason for any adverse effects (on Maldives-India relations),” he added. The Maldives President also revealed he informed PM Modi during their first meeting late last year that Male did not intend to halt any ongoing project. However, Turkey

and Maldives held a meeting on a free trade agreement on March 20 while Chinese ‘research’ ships are allowed to dock.

Muizzu’s demand comes five days after the third meeting of the India-Maldives core group that was told about the replacement of some Indian military personnel.

The first batch of Indian military personnel has already left the island nation. Muizzu had asked all 88 military personnel to leave by May 10. In his interview, Muizzu said India was instrumental in providing aid to the country and had implemented “greatest number” of projects.

THE HINDU, DELHI 19-3-2024

All eyes are now on the Indian Ocean region

Both the Western Indian Ocean and the Northern Indian Ocean have become active geographies again

Rajiv Bhatia

While the Indian government’s focus from January 2021 was fixed on the Indo-Pacific with a sustained endeavour to strengthen the Quad, policy attention has shifted back to the Indian Ocean since October 2023. Of course, the Indo-Pacific strategy covers both the Pacific and Indian Oceans, but when danger deepens, the immediate neighbourhood matters more than distant shores.

Maldives President Muizzu says surveillance of his country’s territory should not concern any “external parties”

The Maldives, with Mohamed Muizzu as President, seems to be heading on a collision course with India. Despite New Delhi’s patience and diplomatic tact, Male continues to deepen its embrace of China. In contrast, Sri Lanka showed greater sensitivity to India’s security concerns by imposing a year-long moratorium on foreign research ships, including Chinese ones, to its ports. Last month, India’s SAGAR policy produced a valuable dividend as the Prime Ministers of India and Mauritius inaugurated a new airstrip and a jetty in the Agaléga Islands, boosting Mauritius’s capability to curb illegal activities in its vast Extended Economic Zone.

Both the Western Indian Ocean littered with island nations and the Northern Indian Ocean stretching from the Arabian Sea to the Suez have become active geographies again. The gradual regionalisation of the Israel-Hamas conflict, as reflected in the attacks by Houthi rebels on international shipping, has now led to a massive drop in transits through the Suez Canal. The diversion of ships to the longer route around the Cape of Good Hope adversely affects all nations in the region, big or small.

The new chain of developments is set to expand the Chinese Navy’s footprint in the region. Its broad objective is to assert dominance. With the Maldives as a willing partner, Beijing lost little time in announcing a

new agreement under which unspecified military assistance would be extended gratis to Maldives. This comes when 88 Indian military personnel, deployed with the host nation's consent to operate humanitarian flights of three aviation platforms, has been replaced by a civilian group.

The strategic contestation between China and India is intensifying. Much of China's trade and energy supplies pass through the region, so its case for security for its supply routes cannot be dismissed. But what is worrisome is its strategic intent to create an adverse environment for India's security by turning the country's neighbours against it. A clear pattern is emerging behind Beijing's quest for naval bases in Djibouti, Kyaukphyu, Gwadar, and Hambantota. This, combined with the nearly four-year-old border standoff, which has defied a diplomatic resolution, has meant the two nations continue to confront each other as adversaries.

India has been facing a "bully" in a very "determined manner," observed India's defence secretary recently. He spoke not only of the border situation but also of the Indo-Pacific where "a pivotal moment" was being witnessed. India and the U.S., he underlined, were key stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region. Cooperation helps them in addressing the strategic competition with China. Collaboration in underwater domain awareness has been identified as a key goal in dealing with the "emerging" threats.

Besides the U.S., where do the U.K., European Union, France, and Germany stand as far as Indian Ocean rivalries are concerned? Geographic proximity to the region demands that they take a clear line on China's activities. While they are concerned about Beijing's illegal claims in the South China Sea, they must see that a similar kind of assertiveness and hostile intent is building up in the Indian Ocean too. Each of these players seeks closer economic and security cooperation with India, and incremental progress is taking place. But they display a 'studied ambiguity' when it comes to interpreting China's behaviour and the long-term motivations driving it. The geographic distance of the European nations from China gives them a sense of security. They should re-examine the fundamental tenets of their Asia strategy. But will they, given their excessive preoccupation with the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza? Recent interactions with European officials and scholars generate limited hope; therefore, the task to persuade them must go on.

India's other options

The government has other options too. First, India needs to convey a clear message to its strategic partners that while it is conscious of its Indo-Pacific responsibilities, it prioritises the Indian Ocean region. Second, a critical audit of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) is needed. While IORA is underperforming and has become too

amorphous to be effective, the CSC faces the danger of losing a key member, the Maldives, if the island nation's partnership with China deepens. It may be time for New Delhi to encourage the creation of a new mechanism with the objective of bolstering maritime security and optimising the potential for the Blue Economy. This group could comprise four nations from the neighbourhood (India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar) and four island states (Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros, and Madagascar). The ninth seat may be kept for the Maldives if it adopts a sensible policy. This group can be named the 'Indian Ocean Cooperation Organisation.' Third, *Foreign Affairs Insights & Review* ranked the Indian Navy the seventh most powerful in the world. As India aims to become the third largest economy, it should find new budgetary resources for its Navy to make it the third or fourth strongest.

Rajiv Bhatia is Distinguished Fellow Gateway House, is a former ambassador and the author of 'India-Africa Relations: Changing Horizons'

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 27-3-2024

India backs Philippines' national sovereignty, says Jaishankar; China bristles

Rezaul H Laskar

NEW DELHI: India backs the Philippines in upholding its national sovereignty and seeks "staunch adherence" to a rules-based order, external affairs minister S Jaishankar said on Tuesday amid a flaring up of tensions between Beijing and Manila over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

Following talks with Jaishankar in Manila, Filipino secretary of foreign affairs Enrique Manalo said at a media briefing that the two sides will accelerate maritime cooperation with a dialogue which is expected to focus on marine domain awareness, shipping, search and rescue, and law enforcement.

Strategic cooperation between India and the Philippines, especially in defence and security, has grown significantly in recent years.

In 2022, Manila became the first foreign customer for the BrahMos cruise missile by inking a \$375-million order for the weapon system developed by India and Russia. India and the Philippines are also part of the Indo-Pacific maritime domain awareness initiative.

Without directly naming China or referring to territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Jaishankar told the media after his talks with Manalo that all parties must adhere to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which is "the constitution of the seas". He added: "I take this opportunity to firmly reiterate India's support to the Philippines for upholding its national sovereignty."

India is "deeply invested" in the region because of its Act East policy and Indo-Pacific vision and strongly supports Asean's centrality and unity. "We are also

convinced that the progress and prosperity of this region is best served by staunch adherence to a rules-based order,” he said.

Manalo said the Philippines and India are “staunch advocates” of freedom of navigation and adherence to international law, including UNCLOS and the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. This ruling declared China’s claims in the South China as unlawful.

The position of both countries was reflected during the discussions on Tuesday, “especially on recent actions of China in the West Philippines Sea”, Manalo said. The two sides have decided to accelerate maritime cooperation with discussions to be held in Manila that will look at promising areas for collaboration, such as maritime domain awareness, shipping and seafaring, search and rescue, law enforcement and environmental protection, Manalo said.

The Philippines also sees India’s defence industries playing an important role in the modernisation programme of the country’s armed forces, and priorities include education, training, research and development in support of Manila’s self-reliant defence posture, he added.

Within hours, China reacted to the comments by Jaishankar and Manalo by saying that “third parties” have no role in the disputes in the South China Sea. Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian told a media briefing in Beijing in response to a question: “Maritime disputes are issues between the countries concerned. Third parties have no right to interfere whatsoever.”

Lin added that relevant parties should “face squarely the facts and truth on the South China Sea issue, and respect China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests”.

These developments come days after angry exchanges between the Philippines and China over territorial claims in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. The Philippines made a strong protest over “aggressive actions” by China’s Coast Guard and maritime militia against a Filipino resupply mission, while Beijing urged Manila to behave cautiously and seek dialogue, the second such warning in three months.

Jaishankar, who is on a three-nation tour of Southeast Asia that includes Singapore and Malaysia, said India’s ties with the Philippines have grown in areas such as trade, investment, health, food security, education, science and technology, defence and maritime cooperation. Bilateral trade crossed the \$3-billion mark last year and India, as the fifth largest economy, is preparing to step up its engagement with the Philippines, he said.

Both sides are moving ahead on quick impact projects in agriculture, health and capacity building, and the “growing comfort and trust” are reflected in ongoing

supplies of rice from India as an exceptional measure, Jaishankar said.

Manalo said both countries are having extensive discussions on defence and security cooperation, mainly to support a rules-based order in the context of their deep interest in ensuring a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

The two sides also explored cooperation to ensure the safety of Indian and Filipino seafarers working on merchant vessels in the Red Sea in view of the current spate of attacks by Houthi rebels. Manalo expressed appreciation for the Indian Navy’s “immediate and effective response” to a distress call by the vessel MV True Confidence, which resulted in the safe return of 13 Filipino seafarers. Jaishankar noted that an Indian Coast Guard vessel was making a port call in Manila and said he had briefed Manalo about the Indian Navy’s deployments in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea to counter ongoing threats.

Jaishankar also met National Security Adviser Eduardo Año, defence secretary Gilbert Teodoro and President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 26-3-2024

S Jaishankar in Singapore: 'India, Russia took extra care for each other's interests'

Vaishnawi Sinha

EAM Jaishankar expressed confidence in the future of India-Russia ties, saying that both countries have “taken extra care” of each other.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Sunday expressed confidence in the future of India-Russia relations, and stressed that Moscow has always maintained a strong and positive relationship with New Delhi.

EAM Jaishankar, while interacting with the Indian community during his visit to Singapore, said that both India and Russia have taken “extra care” to look after each other's interests. While responding to a question, Jaishankar said, “I will ask myself...Has Russia helped us or harmed us?...Are there gains to be made from Russia? or is it only damage that will come out of that?” “If I do my calculation from my perspective and my experiences, I will get the answer. And the answer in this case is that Russia is a country with which we have always had a positive relationship. Both India and Russia have taken that extra care to look after each other's interests,” he added.

The foreign minister further insisted that both the countries should move forward with confidence, which will further strengthen their ties.

Jaishankar is on an official visit to Singapore, Philippines and Malaysia from March 23-27, 2024. Moreover, he also emphasised India-Singapore ties during his interaction with the Indian community in

Singapore and said it was a privilege to have been personally involved in this journey.

"As our connections grew closer, as the community has grown, as India has become more globalized, the ties between India and Singapore have reflected that and it's been my privilege to be part of this journey at least for a decade and a half personally," the foreign minister said. S Jaishankar's comments on strong ties with Moscow came hours after he interacted with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, offering his condolences for the March 23 terror attack on a Moscow shopping mall and concert hall.

(With inputs from ANI)

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 29-3-2024

Ukrainian minister arrives in India to build support for 'peace formula'

PM spoke to Putin, Zelenskyy on March 20

Sandeep Dikshit

New Delhi, Despite excellent ties with Russia, India is hosting Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, who arrived here on Thursday amid talk of Prime Minister Narendra Modi being seen by the West as a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. On his maiden visit to the country, Kuleba will build on the dialogue between PM Modi and Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for his "peace initiative" that involves Russia giving up all captured territory and its leaders tried for war crimes.

"Our position is very clear on peace initiatives and how we look at the Ukraine-Russia conflict. We continue to encourage peaceful resolution of the conflict through dialogue and diplomacy and remain open to engaging all means and ways to help achieve this objective," said MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal on the aim of the visit.

The visit comes just over a week after PM Modi spoke to Presidents of Ukraine and Russia on March 20 over the phone. In his talks with both leaders, PM Modi said India supports all efforts for an early and peaceful resolution of all issues between Kiev and Moscow. The PM had added that India would do its utmost, within its means, to support a peaceful solution.

"It will be important for us to see India attend the inaugural peace summit, which is currently being prepared in Switzerland," Zelenskyy posted on X after the conversation. The West is hosting an "international peace summit" where it is keen on a high-level Indian representation.

In a balancing effort, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar spoke to his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov a couple of days ago.

Kuleba said he would look to boost bilateral ties between the two countries and build on the dialogue between PM Modi and Zelenskyy. "The Ukrainian-Indian cooperation is important and we will be reinvigorating ties. Building on the dialogue between

Zelenskyy and Modi, we will pay specific attention to the peace formula," Kuleba posted on X.

His official engagements include meetings with Jaishankar, Deputy National Security Adviser Vikram Misri to discuss matters pertaining to the bilateral partnership and cooperation on regional and global issues of mutual interest, said the MEA.

THE HINDU, DELHI 25-3-2024

Express View on PM Modi in Bhutan: India's Bhutan model

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bhutan last week underlines the special importance of the Himalayan Kingdom for India's foreign policy. The urgency of the visit, as well as its many substantive outcomes, relate to the ghost in the room during PM Modi's talks with the leadership in Bhutan — China. The economic rise of China and its growing political assertiveness over the last few decades has allowed Beijing to contest India's natural primacy in the Subcontinent.

With China's economy now more than four times larger than India's, Beijing's capacity to deploy financial resources in South Asia has become much bigger. Even when China's economy was weaker than India's, Beijing focused on strategic economic cooperation with the Subcontinent. As the world's second-largest economy and neighbour to the subcontinent, China's economic salience in South Asia is now powerful and enduring.

China's wealth has generated a variety of tools to enhance its political and diplomatic clout in other nations. Beijing's influence and operations to capture critical elements of the elites and set favourable narratives have been visible all around the world. It is no surprise that India's smaller neighbours find it hard to resist these pressures. Nowhere are they more consequential than in Bhutan, nestling in the sensitive eastern Himalayas, where the frontiers of Bangladesh, India and its north-eastern provinces, Nepal and Tibet converge around the sensitive Siliguri Corridor. China-controlled Tibet's Chumbi Valley on the western flank of Bhutan is positioned like a dagger down the throat of the narrow Siliguri Corridor that connects India's mainland with its north-eastern provinces.

China's growing activity in this region led to serious military tensions between Delhi and Beijing in Bhutan's disputed Doklam plateau during the summer of 2017. To be sure, Bhutan is India's most steadfast South Asian partner in the subcontinent, and it has no formal diplomatic relations with China. Yet Beijing has been mounting relentless pressure on Thimphu for a favourable border settlement and demanding a bilateral relationship equal to that with Delhi.

As External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar puts it, India had long neglected the nature of China's growing South Asian challenge in the name of building

good relations with Beijing. Delhi is now realistic enough to recognise that it can't sustain its historic primacy over South Asia by mere fiat. It also knows it can't keep China, the world's second most powerful nation, out of the Subcontinent.

Delhi's focus now is on offering deeper economic cooperation to its neighbours, treating them as sovereign equals, and developing mutually beneficial security cooperation. PM Modi's visit to Bhutan is about translating that framework into concrete reality. The joint statement issued after the PM's visit said, "Bharat for Bhutan and Bhutan for Bharat is an abiding reality of the region".

Delhi and Thimphu backed up this claim with strong commitments to greater consultation and coordination on security issues and building transformative economic connectivity, both physical and digital. Although each of India's relations with its neighbours has a unique complexity, getting Bhutan right could provide a productive template for the rejuvenation of India's rocky relations with other neighbours.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 22-3-2024
PM seeks India's support to import power from Bhutan

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday sought assistance from India for importing electricity from Bhutan through its territories.

She made the request when Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Pranay Verma called on her at the Gono Bhaban.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, PM's speech writer M Nazrul Islam said, "The prime minister has sought support from India to import electricity from Bhutan smoothly."

He said Bangladesh will import electricity from Bhutan and an agreement in this regard will be signed when the Bhutanese king visits on March 25.

Sources said Bangladesh initially plans to import around 1,500MW electricity from Bhutan and that discussion on this issue between the two sides has almost completed.

Hasina also urged the Indian government to withdraw its anti-dumping measures on shipments of jute and jute goods from Bangladesh.

She said India can modernise the Syedpur railway workshop in Nilphamari.

The premier, also the Awami League president, told the envoy that Bangladesh has made unprecedented development because of continuation of democracy in the country.

She mentioned that after the assassination of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and until 1996, victory in the national elections used to be decided by a "certain quarter". That is why the AL could not win the 1991 election despite having public

support, Hasina said. "But in 1996, the same quarter bowed to the desire of the mass people. Awami League for the first time won the election that year," she said.

Verma mentioned that four projects were implemented in Bangladesh under the Indian Line of Credit (LOC) last year. "And two more projects are in the pipeline for implementation," he said.

The high commissioner said his country is committed to taking forward the Bangladesh-India negotiations for Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

He said CEPA would be helpful after Bangladesh's graduation to a developing economy in 2026 from a least developed country. The diplomat said discussions He going on to prepare a new framework for the LOC to make it project-based.

In the power and energy sector, India expressed its willingness to establish a high-power grid line through Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal for transmission of power easily to any part of the four countries. Verma conveyed greetings from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Hasina. He invited the Bangladesh premier to visit India after the national elections there. Hasina accepted the invitation, said Nazrul.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 17-3-2024
JAN 7 POLLS

If not for India, others would have interfered: Says Quader

BSS, Dhaka

Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader yesterday said no powerful country could interfere in the January 7 national election as India stood beside Bangladesh.

India did not interfere in Bangladesh's polls but many powerful countries tried to influence the election, he said while addressing the biennial conference of Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad at Dhakeshwari National Temple in the after afternoon.

"We conducted our elections. India didn't interfere. They [India] said let Bangladesh decide on Bangladesh's election. Many powers in the world wanted to play an evil game here. India stood strongly by our side," said Quader, also the road transport bridges minister.

He said the Bangladesh-India relations have reached a new height under the leaderships of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi.

Different problems, including border issues, were solved through discussions with India, the minister said. "Positive progress has been achieved over the Teesta water-sharing agreement, but we have to keep patience."

He said it is not possible to solve those problems by creating any bitterness.

Everyone, including Hindus, Buddhists and Christians, had contributed to Bangladesh's independence struggle. Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Pranay Kumar Verma inaugurated the conference. Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumdar, Health Minister Samanta Lal Sen, and State Minister for Chattogram Hill Tracts Affairs Kujendra Lal Tripura, among others, addressed the event, with Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad President JL Bhowmik in the chair.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 31-3-2024
**BSF shoots one Bangladeshi dead,
 injures another**

Staff Correspondent, Lalmonirhat

A Bangladeshi national was shot dead by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) near the Burirhat border in Lalmonirhat's Kaliganj upazila early yesterday. Kaliganj police recovered the bullet-hit body of Murali Chandra Barman, 41, of Uttar Balapara village under the upazila's Chandrapur union, said Kaliganj Police Station Officer-in-Charge Imtiaz Kabir. Another Bangladeshi national was also injured in the shooting incident that took place near border pillar number 913 and was undergoing treatment at a clinic in Rangpur city, the OC said. His identity could not be ascertained immediately.

The bullet-hit body has been sent to Lalmonirhat Sadar Hospital morgue for autopsy.

Confirming the matter, Lalmonirhat 15 BGB Battalion's Commanding Officer Lt Col Mofazzal Hossain Akhand said a letter was sent to the BSF protesting the killing of Murali Chandra.

According to Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), a patrolling team of 75 BSF Battalion BSF of Chitragot camp under Sitai Police Station in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal opened fire when 10-12 Bangladeshis, including Murali Chandra, entered India to fetch Indian cattle.

After the two Bangladeshis were shot, the people who were accompanying them brought them to Bangladesh. Murali Chandra died when he was being taken to Rangpur for treatment.

A relative of the victim, who wished not to be named, told The Daily Star that Murali Chandra was an active member of the cattle smuggling syndicate.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 26-3-2024
**BD High Commissioner to Pakistan
 asked to return home**

Diplomatic Correspondent

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has withdrawn Md Ruhul Alam Siddique, currently serving as the high commissioner of Bangladesh to Pakistan from his post and asked him to return home.

"A decision has been taken to transfer you to the headquarters," the ministry said in its administrative order issued on Sunday.

Ruhul served as the ambassador of Bangladesh to Portugal before he was appointed the high commissioner to Pakistan. He is a career diplomat from the 11th batch of the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS).

In February, transfer orders were issued for Bangladesh High Commissioner to Canada Khalilur Rahman, Ambassador to Germany Md Mosharraf Hossain Bhuiyan, Ambassador to Italy Md Monirul Islam, Ambassador to Poland Sultana Laila Hossain, Ambassador to Kuwait Major General Md Ashikuzzaman, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the UN Offices and other International Organizations in Geneva Mohammad Sufiur Rahman, Ambassador to Japan Shahabuddin Ahmed, Ambassador to Thailand Mohammed Abdul Hye, and Ambassador to Greece Ashud Ahmed, according to a release.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 26-3-2024
BD, Bhutan sign three new MoUs

Diplomatic Correspondent

Bangladesh and Bhutan signed three new memorandums of understanding (MoUs) to enhance mutual cooperation between the two neighbouring countries.

Bhutanese King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina witnessed the MoU signing agreement held at the Prime Ministers Office (PMO) on Monday.

The MoUs are (i) Establishment of a Special Economic Zone in Kurigram, (ii) Setting up a Burn and Plastic Surgery Unit in Thimphu, and (iii) technical cooperation on consumer rights. Another MoU on cultural exchange was renewed. Health Minister Smanta Lal Sen, Executive Chairman of Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) Shaikh Yusuf Harun, Directorate of National Consumers Right Protection Director General (Additional Secretary) AHM Shafiquzzaman and Cultural Affairs Secretary Khalil Ahmed signed the MoUs from Bangladesh side. Bhutanese Health Minister Tandin Wangchuk, Bhutanese Commerce Secretary Tashi Wangmk and Bhutanese Foreign Secretary Pema Choden signed the MoUs on behalf of their country. Meanwhile, Bangladesh offered to increase the number of annual medical seats for Bhutanese students from 22 to 30 while the foreign service academy of Bangladesh offered two seats for the Bhutanese foreign service officers every year for capacity building. Bangladesh will also extend necessary assistance in setting up a Diplomatic Training Institute in Bhutan.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 29-3-2024
BILATERAL TIES

Donald Lu lauds Bangladeshi-Americans' role

Diplomatic Correspondent

Donald Lu, US assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, appreciated the contributions of Bangladeshi Americans in building foundations of bilateral relations between the two nations.

The comments came during a reception hosted by the Bangladesh embassy in Washington DC on Tuesday, marking the occasion of the Independence and National Day of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh ambassador to the US Muhammad Imran delivered the welcome address at the function.

"We are so proud of the work of Bangladeshi Americans and what they do to support relations between our great nations," said Donald Lu.

Donald Lu referred to Bangladeshi-American entrepreneurs, who have excelled in various fields.

He made the remarks when asked by a journalist on steps the Biden administration may take, considering that Bangladesh led by "an authoritarian prime minister and people are suffering due to absence of democracy and the rule of law" as Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed his commitment to strengthening democratic governance and promoting human rights in his statement on the Independence Day.

Bangladesh Ambassador Muhammad Imran said Bangladesh's long-standing partnership with the US is of high priority.

He mentioned that Bangladesh shares a common vision with the US for a free and open Indo-Pacific "We with shared prosperity for all."

Dignitaries including Ambassador Rebecca Gonzales, director of Office of Foreign Missions of the US State Department were present at the event.

Muhammad Ziauddin, ambassador-at-large of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh; and Virginia State Senator Saddam Selim, were also present.

Meanwhile, US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller on Wednesday said the promotion of democracy is a top priority for the US president.

"We wanted to see free and fair elections and we will continue to support free, full, open democracy in Bangladesh," he said.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 27-3-2024

Nine agreements signed on China-Sri Lanka cooperation

The signing of nine new agreements between China and Sri Lanka took place today (26.03.2024) under the patronage of Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang and Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena.

The Prime Minister today paid floral tributes to the martyred war heroes at the Monument to the People's Heroes at Tiananmen Square, and after receiving the guard of honour from the Chinese military, bilateral discussions were commenced. Later, in the bilateral talks held in Great Hall in Beijing, more attention was paid to increasing overall cooperation in the social, cultural, educational, and agricultural sectors in addition to economic cooperation.

The Prime Ministers of the two countries confirmed that a new chapter in the long-term friendship and cooperation between Sri Lanka and China will begin through the nine memoranda of understanding signed between the two countries.

Secretary to the Prime Minister Anura Dissanayake signed the agreements on behalf of Sri Lanka, and the secretaries of nine ministries signed on behalf of China. A group including Ministers of the People's Republic of China, Sri Lankan State Ministers Shehan Semasinghe and Ashoka Priyantha, and MP Yadamini Gunawardena participated in this event.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 27-3-2024

China assures continuous support to debt restructuring process in Sri Lanka

Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang assured Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena that China would assist Sri Lanka's debt restructuring process continuously and help Sri Lanka to develop its economy.

During the high level bilateral talks held today in Beijing, the Chinese Prime Minister praised Sri Lanka's economic progress after a period of economic downside. He expressed gratitude to Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena staying, "You and your family continuously worked for strengthening friendship between China and Sri Lanka". He pointed out that Sri Lanka consistently followed 'One China' policy and supported China at international forums. Premier Li Qiang said his country would also extend assistance to develop Katunayake International Airport, Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City.

Premier Gunawardena thanked China for standing for Sri Lanka's independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty and helping Sri Lanka when faced with international political issues or economic problems

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 30-3-2024

China to foster Shanghai Colombo port cargo enhancements

Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena had a long discussion with Shanghai Mayor Gong Seng in Shanghai, China yesterday (29). It was agreed to establish a strong relationship between Shanghai, China, which is ranked first among the world's port cities and the cities of Colombo and Hambantota, which have

been planned to be developed as a maritime hub in the East and West shipping routes in the future.

A long time has passed since the Sister City Agreement between Colombo and Shanghai was signed, and the Prime Minister pointed out that further work can be carried out under this agreement, which was signed when his brother Prasanna Gunawardena was holding the post of Mayor.

It was emphasised that the city of Shanghai has handled 49.5 million containers in terms of cargo transportation, and last year it ranked first in cargo transportation in the world, and there are many lessons that can be learnt by Sri Lanka in the said sector.

The Mayor of Shanghai assured that the city of Shanghai, which has an annual production income of 4.72 trillion Yuan, and is also a first class business centre and a centre for financial transactions in the world, will share their experiences with Sri Lanka. The Prime Minister pointed out that huge lessons can be learnt by Sri Lanka from the progress made in the planned urban development of the city of Shanghai, which has a population of 25 million people.

The Shanghai Mayor expressed his agreement to support Sri Lanka in each of those fields and invited the officials of those fields to visit Shanghai and study the said fields. The interest of the Chinese people to travel in Sri Lanka, which has many UNESCO heritage sites, has increased, and it was also agreed to explore the possibility of increasing the flights between Colombo and Shanghai.

A group including State Ministers Shehan Semasinghe, Ashoka Priyantha and Secretary to the Prime Minister Anura Dissanayake participated in this event.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 19-3-2024

Scope of FTA to broaden through ECTA

India and Sri Lanka are now seeking to broaden the scope of the FTA through an Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) and a separate Bilateral Investment Treaty will be formed, said Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka Shri Santosh Jha (Pictured) at the 75th year celebration of Sri Lanka India Society in Colombo.

India is Sri Lanka's largest trade partner, the largest foreign investor in recent years and biggest contributor to Sri Lanka's vast tourism potential.

"India and Sri Lanka were the first in the region to sign a Free Trade Agreement in 2000. There is no doubt that FTA has served us well especially in enhancing Sri Lanka's export potential. Once concluded, the ETCA will further strengthen the existing framework by removing impediments to genuine trade, eliminating non-tariff barriers and enabling greater trade facilitation. The main objective remains advancing Sri Lanka's access to vast Indian markets not just in merchandise goods but also in services and to promote further Indian investments. India is a rapidly growing engine for

global growth and Sri Lanka must become more ready to take advantage of this as the preferred partner and a close neighbor.

Our desire to support Sri Lanka's economic recovery and its renewed quest for development is reflected also in our efforts to encourage the Indian private sector to invest in Sri Lanka."

"Connectivity undoubtedly is the central pillar of our emerging partnership and all its dimensions – air, maritime, trade, digital, energy or people-to-people connectivity."

However, the most ambitious recent venture and also the most impactful in terms of potential, has to be the India-Sri Lanka Land Connectivity Corridor. We are now taking the first steps to translate this game-changing initiative into real action on the ground.

Once built, this connectivity corridor will transform our relations, epitomize our unbreakable partnership, and possibly uplift vast populations that it will connect, into a new era of growth and prosperity. Similarly, we are also working towards setting up greater energy connectivity," he said

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 31-3-2024

India, Sri Lanka assess connectivity projects

Senior Advisor to the President on National Security and Chief of Presidential Staff Sagala Ratnayaka, led a high-level delegation in discussions to assess bilateral economic connectivity projects between Sri Lanka and India. These discussions were held in New Delhi on March 28, at the invitation of Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra.

Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra extended a warm welcome to Sagala Ratnayaka, acknowledging the positive momentum in Sri Lanka's economic growth. He said that the current juncture presents an opportune moment for both countries to advance agreed-upon projects, attributing this progress to the strategic vision of President Ranil Wickremesinghe. Ratnayaka expressed his gratitude for the extensive Indian assistance that played a crucial role in stabilising the Sri Lankan economy. He provided insights into the on-going negotiations with the IMF and underscored the imperative of pursuing economic growth. He highlighted the importance of enhancing economic integration with India through improved connectivity, reflecting on the historical ties that bind the two nations as the closest neighbour. During the discussions, both sides conducted a comprehensive review of all bilateral projects, focusing on their timely implementation. It was mutually agreed to engage in this review process on a quarterly basis, demonstrating a commitment to ensuring effective progress in bilateral economic cooperation. The discussions underscored the shared commitment of Sri Lanka and India to strengthen the partnership and foster greater economic collaboration.

With both nations poised to capitalise on emerging opportunities, the discussions in New Delhi marked a significant step forward in deepening bilateral ties and advancing mutual interests.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 27-3-2024

Nepal, China renew pledge to sign BRI execution plan ‘soon’

Two countries to reopen 14 traditional border points.

ANIL GIRI

Kathmandu, Nepal and China on Tuesday reiterated their commitment to ‘very soon’ sign the implementation plan of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which will pave the way for working out financing and investment modality of the projects to be executed in Nepal under the initiative.

During the delegation-level talks between Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Beijing, the two sides agreed to sign the BRI implementation plan “as soon as possible,” according to a Nepali participant in the talks.

No specific date has been finalised, but it could happen during the upcoming foreign secretary-level meeting in Kathmandu or on the seventh anniversary of the signing of the BRI on May 12, or during any other high-level visit between Nepal and China, said the participant.

In the meeting, Wang stressed the need for early conclusion of the BRI implementation plan in order to execute the projects.

“Things remain stuck with China due to our delay in signing the BRI implementation plan,” the Nepali official said.

“Once Deputy Prime Minister Shrestha returns home, we will further discuss signing of the plan.”

In recent meetings, Chinese officials and authorities have made it clear that signing the BRI implementation plan is a prerequisite for extending economic cooperation with Nepal as well as executing the projects that China had committed to in the past, the official said.

Nepal and China signed the BRI framework agreement seven years ago, on May 12, 2017, and the Chinese side had forwarded the text of the plan at the end of 2019.

After Nepali side expressed serious reservations about the text, arguing that Nepal is not interested in commercial loans from China, and set several other conditions to accept support under the BRI framework, negotiations over the BRI projects

and implementation plan were halted, according to officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Nepal is yet to table the BRI framework agreement signed in 2017 in Parliament, nor has it disclosed the proposed terms and conditions of the BRI implementation plan.

The main opposition Nepali Congress and other parties have asked the government to table the agreement in

Parliament and make public the terms and conditions of the BRI implementation plan before signing it.

Ahead of Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s China visit in September 2023, a meeting of high-level government officials entrusted the National Planning Commission to finalize the draft of the BRI implementation plan.

All these exercises have been kept secret, and very few government officials and ministers are aware of what is written and proposed in the BRI implementation plan, according to officials.

On Tuesday also, member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Wang Huning had stressed the need for swift conclusion of BRI negotiations and expediting the agreements signed during the Nepal visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2019.

“During the meeting both the leaders assessed the state of bilateral relations and expressed commitment to work together to further elevate the ties,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated in its account in X formerly known as Twitter. “In a warm and cordial meeting, two leaders emphasized on the swift implementation of projects.”

According to the Nepali side, both Shrestha and Wang discussed the entire gamut of bilateral ties and the status of implementation of the various Chinese-funded projects in Nepal including reopening of the traditional trading points between Nepal and China.

“The Chinese side also expressed happiness over Nepal’s joining China’s Global Development Cooperation’s group of friends, but did not ask Nepal to be part of the two remaining initiatives—the Global Security Initiative (GSI) and the Global Civilizational Initiative (GCI). Nepal’s request for waiving the visa fees for Nepali citizens and making it reciprocal was also discussed, and the Chinese side was positive,” the Nepali official said. “Plus, the agreements and understandings reached during Prime Minister Dahal’s China visit last year figured in the meeting.”

Before having the delegation level talks, DPM Shrestha and Wang had held one-on-one for almost an hour.

According to another Nepali official, the Nepali side proposed elevating the secretary-level bilateral mechanism to the ministerial level.

“But no decision has been made yet,” said Suresh Kaji Shrestha, chief personnel assistant to the DPM over the phone from Beijing. He said the Chinese side has taken the Nepali proposal seriously.

As of now, there is a foreign secretary-level bilateral consultative mechanism that oversees the bilateral relations between Nepal and China.

Just as with India, Nepal and China will also have a ministerial-level bilateral mechanism if China agrees to Nepal's proposal, Nepali officials said.

Nepal and India have a joint commission at foreign minister level in order to oversee the entire aspects of the bilateral ties.

The foreign secretary-level mechanism between Nepal and China was formed in 1996 and the next and 16th meeting is planned in Kathmandu this year.

Likewise, both sides also agreed to carry out the joint inspection of the border as per past agreements and expedite the establishment of agro-industrial parks in Gorkha and Dhading districts as agreed during Prime Minister Dahal's visit to China in September.

In the meeting, according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Wang said DPM Shrestha's first visit to China after the formation of the new government in Nepal reflects the tradition of China-Nepal friendship and the new Nepali government's clear stance on strengthening cooperation with China.

"As a friendly neighbor and strategic partner, China has always placed Nepal in the important direction of its peripheral diplomacy, has always adhered to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence towards Nepal, and has always insisted that all countries, big or small, are equal," the Chinese statement said.

"We firmly support Nepal in safeguarding its national sovereignty, independence, and national dignity, and in exploring a development path that suits its national conditions," the statement further said.

The statement added that China would continue to help with Nepal's economic and social development.

In a usual fashion, Wang said Nepal and China are good neighbors connected by mountains and rivers, good friends who help each other, and good partners seeking common development.

"In 2019, President Xi Jinping paid a historic state visit to Nepal, which pushed the relationship between the two countries to a new level and entered the fast lane," said Wang. "Prime Minister [Pushpa Kamal Dahal's] Prachanda's visit to China last year was also very successful, and the leaders of the two countries reached important consensus on developing China-Nepal relations."

The Chinese foreign ministry statement further said that China is willing to work with Nepal to carry forward the traditional friendship between China and Nepal, consolidate political mutual trust between the two sides, jointly build the Belt and Road with high quality, and promote China-Nepal strategic cooperative partnership to a new and higher level.

Shrestha highlighted the traditional friendship and interdependence between Nepal and China.

"China has provided selfless help to Nepal in response to the earthquake and epidemic, which the Nepali government and people will always remember," the Chinese foreign ministry said, quoting Shrestha.

"Nepal firmly adheres to the one-China policy and will never allow any force to use its territory to engage in anti-China activities...The new Nepal government is committed to developing the economy and improving people's livelihoods, and hopes to learn from China's successful experience," the Chinese foreign ministry statement further said quoting Shrestha.

"...Nepal is willing to strengthen cooperation with China in jointly building the BRI and to join the 'Group of Friends of the Global Development Initiative.'"

The two sides agreed to reopen 14 traditional border trade points and strengthen practical cooperation in trade, investment, tourism and other fields. They also exchanged views on other issues of common concern.

Shrestha also extended an invitation to Wang to visit Nepal, and in response Wang said he will make a return visit to Nepal by the end of this year.

DPM Shrestha is currently in China on a nine-day official visit and will be meeting three secretaries of the Chinese Communist Party from Chongqing, Sichuan and Lhasa provinces in order to discuss various aspects of Nepal-China relations, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

These three provinces oversee the various aspects of Nepal-China relations. Shrestha is scheduled to return home on April 1.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 27-3-2024

Nepal requests China-backed AIIB for soft loans

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, on Monday, urged a visiting AIIB delegation for a policy arrangement for concessional loans to Nepal.

Post Report

Nepal's apex private sector body on Tuesday requested the visiting board officials of the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to invest in Nepal.

According to the statement issued by the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI), Tuesday's meeting specifically dealt with exploring potential investment opportunities in Nepal across various sectors.

Talks were also held on how AIIB could contribute the most in sectors like transportation, energy and urban development, among others. Discussions were held on how the private sector could contribute to the sustainable development of Nepal, the statement said.

Presenting his views, FNCCI President Chandra Dhakal said that Nepal is a country with immense potential for growth and development. He informed the AIIB board officials that the private sector is eager to leverage this potential through strategic partnerships with organisations like AIIB.

Dhakal also said that Nepal is strategically located between two economic giants, India and China, which

means Nepal can provide easy market access to goods produced in Nepal to two of the world's biggest markets. Dhakal highlighted that there are investment opportunities in infrastructure, energy, tourism and agriculture in Nepal. He also informed the officials about the external sector stability that Nepal has achieved. Nepal's foreign exchange reserves have reached record highs in recent months.

Dhakal mentioned that the country is now focused on improving domestic consumption.

"As AIIB has already been a key partner in several important projects in Nepal, we are eager to explore new avenues for collaboration."

Dhakal also informed the board officials of AIIB that the Nepali government is in the process of amending different laws to improve the investment climate of the country. He stated the government is serious about streamlining processes and regulations to create a better 'doing business' climate.

Dhakal said the framework for bilateral investment agreement is expected to be finalised soon.

Further talking about investments, Dhakal informed AIIB officials about the Nepal Investment Summit scheduled for April 28-29. The 'good aspect' of the Investment Summit this time is that the private sector too has been included as co-organisers, he stated.

Dhakal also mentioned that the private sector of Nepal has been leading the country's economic development and will continue doing so in the future. "As president of the FNCCI, I can assure you that we will leave no stone unturned for the socio-economic development of Nepal," he said.

Nepal Electricity Authority, the country's energy utility, also urged the AIIB to increase investment in Nepal's energy sector.

The authority urged the delegation to provide loans at cheaper interest rates for the improvement of energy infrastructure.

The delegation also met Nepal Rastra Bank Governor Maha Prasad Adhikari.

During the meeting, Adhikari informed the visiting delegation about the shortfall in domestic resources to finance critical infrastructure projects.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal on Monday urged the visiting AIIB delegation for a policy to provide concessional loans to Nepal.

During a courtesy meeting with a delegation led by RMP Rathnayake, an AIIB board member, Dahal said that since AIIB has no provision for concessional loans, it will be difficult for a country like Nepal to borrow.

"Nepal still needs concessional loans. I urge you all to consider this."

The prime minister said that currently there are a few projects under AIIB investment in Nepal in the energy sector and there are ample possibilities for investment in hydropower, tourism, information technology and other infrastructure projects.

"Nepal has reached an agreement to export 10,000 megawatts of electricity to India and Bangladesh as well. This has opened the investment door in Nepal's energy trade," he said.

In 2019, the AIIB approved a loan of up to \$90 million for the 216-megawatt Upper Trishuli-1 Hydropower Project, AIIB's first project in Nepal. In the same year, the AIIB also approved a \$112.3 million loan to Nepal to increase access and improve the quality and efficiency of electricity supply across the country's western regions.

The Distribution System Upgrade and Expansion Project is AIIB's first sovereign-backed financing project in Nepal. This is not only the first project to receive approval but also received AIIB's technical assistance under the Special Fund, enabling comprehensive project preparation from the very early stage.

In 2018, Nepal received a \$1 million grant under AIIB's Special Fund to assist the government in preparing the electrification programme in western Nepal, in terms of the feasibility study, technical design, and environmental and social management.

Headquartered in Beijing, the AIIB began operations in January 2016 and has now grown to 100 approved members worldwide.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 29-3-2024

India renews electricity export permission for three months

The southern neighbour agrees to provide 554MW whereas Nepal wants 650MW.

Seema Tamang

KATHMANDU, India has renewed the electricity export permission to Nepal only for three months.

The existing agreement, which was renewed a year ago, expires on March 31.

The Indian side agreed to the renewal three days before the expiry date even though the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) had been following up on the matter regularly for the last three months.

According to NEA spokesman Chandan Kumar Ghosh, the authority has been informed about the three-month extension from the Indian side.

"The agreement has been renewed until June 30," he said. It has been agreed to import 500 megawatts of electricity through the Dhalkebar-Muzaffarpur cross-border transmission line and 54 megawatts via Tanakpur."

The NEA however had sought permission to import 650MW through the Dhalkebar-Muzaffarpur transmission line and 54MW via Tanakpur.

Officials at the energy ministry said that Nepal may face 10-hour-long load-shedding if it can't import around 600MW of electricity from India during the dry season. Nabinraj Singh, spokesperson for the energy ministry, said that the import permission would be in effect till

June-end. "After June 15, we will start exporting energy," he said.

Earlier, Nepal was allowed to import energy at any time as needed. But this time around, Nepal will be allowed to import 554MW of electricity only during 6am to 6pm. "With this arrangement, we will have an electricity shortage and the industrial estates may face shortage mainly during the peak hours," the ministry official said.

According to the official, Nepal is still lobbying with India for supply during additional hours.

According to NEA officials, Nepal will need around 2,000MW in next two months whereas the total domestic production will be only around 1,400MW as the water levels in the rivers recedes significantly during the dry season.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 16-3-2024

Pakistani ambassador in exclusive interview with Tehran Times:

Iran, Pakistan should have robust cooperation in different fields

By Mona Hojat Ansari

TEHRAN – Encouraging further cooperation across various domains such as culture, tourism, and trade, the Pakistani ambassador to Iran has emphasized the importance of strengthening the longstanding bond between Iran and Pakistan.

In an exclusive interview with the Tehran Times on Wednesday, Muhammad Mudassir Tipu underscored the need for both nations to actively nurture and enhance their deep-seated connections which are rooted in history.

The full text of the interview can be read below:

Iran and Pakistan experienced a short period of testy ties back in January when the two countries launched attacks on each other's territories. Both sides, however, seemed to be keen to repair ties and resolve any misunderstandings. How do you assess the relations between Iran and Pakistan right now?

There is a very high level of political engagement going on between the two countries. The Iranian leadership sent very strong congratulatory messages to Pakistan when our new government was recently elected. So did Islamabad when parliamentary elections were held in Iran. I think that shows that the relationship is in the right direction and that it's being solidified, strengthened, and widened.

Terrorism is one thing that the two states will focus on. But there are also far more areas where we need more cooperation. There is a historical perspective that connects more than 300 million people in the two countries. We are connected through geography, history, and culture and I think both leaderships understand that and are determined to move forward and further diversify and expand relations. While we need robust cooperation to tackle terrorism, we should

meanwhile not get fixated on it. We need to widen our horizons and make use of the countless opportunities we have to deepen our ties. This is what I am looking at as the ambassador.

Pakistan has a new leadership following the recent elections. How do you see the future course of Tehran-Islamabad relations under the new Pakistani leadership?

The leadership in Pakistan is extremely determined to robustly engage with Iran to promote political relations, diplomatic relations, and trade relations. If you take a look at the messages exchanged between the two sides it becomes quite clear that both Iran and Pakistan are confident that going forward, our relations will become stronger and deeper.

Both Tehran and Islamabad have been emphasizing trade in the past months. President Raisi and Prime Minister Sharif inaugurated border markets last year. What is the current volume of trade between the two countries and what is the outlook for it?

We want to elevate it to five billion dollars in a few years, but the potential is much larger than five billion dollars. I have discussions with trade bodies of Iran and Pakistan on a regular basis. We are trying to come up with border mechanisms that will make it easier to exchange goods and commodities without being hindered by regulatory problems at the borders. There are many things that need to be discussed including how trade can be facilitated by building new infrastructure and what kinds of trucks and containers need to be put to use.

Thankfully, trade is going up but we are hoping for more. I am deeply engaged in promoting trade relations between Pakistan and Iran. The border markets that were inaugurated last year were indicative of the fact that Pakistani and Iranian leadership is extremely cognizant of the needs of the people who are living in those areas. And I must share with you that yesterday I had a conference with trading bodies and people were very upbeat. But as this is something that's happening between two large countries, lots of things must be taken into account.

Pakistan has recently announced that it will proceed with building the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project. Do you think the Pakistani side is serious about pursuing this project given the U.S. sanctions on Iran?

We are in very good negotiations with Iran. We have been having multiple rounds of discussions and we are trying to find a viable solution for this project. I am optimistic about it. You know, these are mega projects that require a whole host of project financing, technical expertise, land acquisition, and these kinds of things. But I am very optimistic about the project.

Both Iran and Pakistan have many tourist attractions, but it seems that these attractions are

unknown to the people of both countries. Do you have any plans to help with this issue?

This is something in which I'm personally very passionate about it. And I would quote a Chinese quotation. They say that a journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step. So, you know, I am creating those steps through which more space for tourism can be created between both countries. I'm trying to promote Iran in Pakistan. I'm trying to promote Pakistan in Iran. As part of my conversations with the Iranian media, I'm always saying that tourism is a remarkable aspect that can bring both countries together. And I'm also going to go to some Iranian historical and cultural entities to create more understanding in Pakistan about the depth of Iran. And I want Iranian people also to go to Pakistan, and explore its beauty. It's a safe country. It's very beautiful, very remarkable. You can take a bus and from Zahedan and Taftan, you can enter Pakistan. You can see the beauty of Balouchestan and then you can enter different provinces of Pakistan right up to the north of the country. So, I am personally passionate about it. We are trying to hold some exhibitions. I am trying to do some programs, and some events related to tourism so that Iranian people get to know more about the potential of tourism in Pakistan.

What about education? I have personally met many exchange students from Pakistan at different universities. There also seems to be enthusiasm among Iranians to learn Urdu while Pakistanis appear to be interested in Persian. Are we going to see more in this field?

This is a very good idea and I'm working on it. A professor from Pakistan will soon visit the University of Tehran. As more such visits happen in the future, we can begin to also widen cooperation in education and exchange academics.

Also, if you ask me personally, I want to learn the Persian language and read Persian literature. I also want to get to know Iran's history because it's a very vital history that's rich in traditions. But do I want to do it at the national level? It would be the desire of every ambassador of Pakistan to Iran to promote the Persian language because it's part of our history. It's part of our tradition. So similarly, I would also be very happy if such a cooperation can take place.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 17-3-2024

FM Dar, Afghanistan's Muttaqi agree to foster bilateral ties

Dawn Report

KARACHI: Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar and Afghanistan's Interim Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi on Saturday agreed to continue working together in building on fraternal bilateral relations.

"Expanding cooperation in connectivity, trade, security, counterterrorism and people-to-people contacts is a top priority for Pakistan," the foreign minister posted on X,

after he received a congratulatory call from the Afghan minister.

A statement posted on X by the deputy spokesperson at the Afghan foreign ministry, Hafiz Zia Ahmad, said FM Muttaqi hoped that Mr Dar's assumption of office would have a "positive and constructive role in strengthening the relations" between the two neighbouring countries, *Dawn.com* reported.

"The region is increasing its positive interactions day by day and the practical work of major infrastructure projects is starting at the regional level and we are expecting to take a constructive part in Pakistan," the statement quoted the Afghan foreign minister as saying. He invited Mr Dar to visit Afghanistan.

The statement said both sides emphasised bringing facilities for passengers, patients and commercial traffic on the Durand Line and eliminating existing problems.

Last week, Kandahar Governor Mullah Mohammad Shirin Akhund received Pakistan's Chargé d'Affaires (Cd'A) and head of mission in Kabul, Ubaidur Rehman Nizamani.

The Pakistani envoy travelled to Kandahar to meet with Mullah Shirin, a close confidant of the Taliban supreme leader, amid a tense relationship between the two neighbours.

The senior Afghan Taliban leader had expressed the hope that Pakistan's new government would have cordial relations with Kabul. "We discussed matters of common interest and agreed to advance Pakistan-Afghanistan relations in all mutually beneficial areas," Ambassador Nizamani had told *Dawn.com*.

Pakistan's Ambassador to the UN Munir Akram had asked the UN Security Council last week to urge the Taliban rulers in Afghanistan to terminate their relationship with the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan group.

Ambassador Akram had also said that the international community must help millions of destitute Afghans "through the provision of unconditional humanitarian assistance".

DAILY TIMES, ISLAMABAD 21-3-2024

No Cross-border Attacks

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif unequivocally conveyed that his government would not tolerate any terrorism originating from across the border. On an ideal day, such enunciation might have prompted many to criticise him for toeing an aggressive line, but given the extraordinary circumstances wherein neighbour after neighbour seeks to test Pakistan's resolve towards its sovereignty, this bold stance should scream out a determination to take concerted action against those threatening the stability and security of Pakistan. The prime minister's firm declaration can be traced back to the long-standing issue of cross-border terrorism and the continuous flow of militants and weapons from adjoining countries. Pakistan has

repeatedly urged Kabul to exercise restraint and align itself with the right side in its fight against terrorism. However, the response from the Afghan authorities has been limited, prompting Pakistan to maintain a proactive stance to safeguard its interests. The situation became downright chaotic in the wake of the latest provocations and skirmishes on the Afghan frontier. Yet, here too, Pakistan chose to maintain relative calm and proceed with caution. Its authorities have displayed restraint and patience in handling the situation; avoiding any escalations that could further destabilize the region. This measured approach underscores Pakistan's commitment to peace and security in the face of external threats. Earlier this year, Pakistan conducted counter-strikes against Iran in response to provocations along the border, prompting Tehran to reconsider its aggressive tactics. These retaliatory measures served as a reminder that Pakistan stands fully prepared to defend its sovereignty and tackle any attempts to disrupt its peace and stability. While it may wish for peace in the neighbourhood, it carries the capacity to strategically respond to external threats; upholding its national interests and protecting its citizens from harm. Notwithstanding the zeal of our soldiers, the proverbial monstrosity cannot be overlooked. Despite efforts to contain terrorism and maintain security, Pakistan has witnessed a resurgence of militant activities that have resulted in significant casualties. With over 1,500 violence-related fatalities and just as many injuries from 789 terror attacks and counter-terror operations in the year 2023 alone, statistics have reached a six-year high. The escalating ordeal, therefore, underscores the urgency of addressing the root causes of terrorism and mobilising international support to combat this global threat effectively. As for PM Sharif, a strong and unwavering stand against external threats might have been the right call, but words are just words until action is behind them. Protecting the people and upholding the sovereignty of the crescent-adorned flag in the face of evolving security dynamics is a herculean task, which requires support from all stakeholders. The attack on Gwadar, for instance, bears a grave message for anyone wishing to listen.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 23-3-2024

Security pledges for workers as CPEC set to expand

Khaleeq Kiani

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan on Friday assured Chinese workers of top-level security as it pushed for the second phase of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through the launch of five special industrial zones.

At a meeting with the Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Jiang Zaidong, Planning and Development Minister Ahsan Iqbal assured the Chinese side that Pakistan had made significant efforts to safeguard the security of

Chinese workers and would further implement top-level security measures for Chinese personnel.

He said security was a prerequisite for development, and Pakistan acknowledged the full recognition of CPEC construction and security risks. However, these risks would not disrupt work on CPEC projects, he added.

The two sides agreed to intensify efforts to establish a new working group on five new economic corridors under the second phase, aligning with the Five Es framework — export, energy, equity, environment and e-Pakistan — already prepared by the planning ministry. The Chinese ambassador congratulated Mr Iqbal on assuming the role of planning minister for the fourth time.

“Both sides have agreed to expedite Phase 2 of the CPEC, while deciding to establish a working group on five new economic corridors, including the Corridor of Job Creation, Corridor of Innovation, Corridor of Green Energy, and Inclusive Regional Development,” an official statement said.

Both the planning ministry and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) of China will prepare separate concept papers on the new economic corridors, which will provide a clear roadmap for each sector in the future. These concept papers will be consolidated before presentation at the upcoming Joint Coordination Committee (JCC) meeting, which is expected later this year, the statement said.

The planning ministry has already initiated the implementation of the Five Es framework. This framework will be aligned with the five new economic corridors to advance Pakistan's prosperity in each sector under the vision of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, Mr Iqbal told the meeting, highlighting the importance of accelerating Pakistan's export capabilities through enterprise development and job creation.

During the meeting, Mr Iqbal outlined a strategic approach to maximise the success of special economic zones (SEZs) within Pakistan. He proposed a “One plus Four” model, wherein each SEZ in Pakistan would be partnered with one province from China, one industry group to develop specialised clusters within these zones, one zone from China to provide technical expertise, and a state-owned enterprise to spearhead SEZ development.

Mr Iqbal said this collaborative framework would speed up establishing and growing special economic zones in Pakistan, enhancing their competitiveness and attractiveness to investors.

“The Chinese envoy appreciated Pakistan's efforts to implement the CPEC, particularly the initiation of Phase 2,” the statement said.

Addressing Pakistan's need to boost the efficiency of special economic zones to increase foreign exchange, the Chinese envoy suggested that officers in charge of the zones must visit Chinese industrial parks to observe

firsthand the efficiency measures practised by Chinese authorities.

The minister noted that the success of special economic zones was dependent on their ability to become clusters of specific industries, fostering economies of scale and creating a vibrant ecosystem conducive to innovation and growth.

The discussions also focused on enhancing regional connectivity, emphasising critical infrastructure projects like the Gwadar Port and the M-8 motorway, which will strengthen trade links and facilitate regional integration.

Mr Iqbal also appreciated Chinese assistance in helping Pakistan develop its exports and conceded that Pakistan's current challenge was to determine how quickly it could build its exports through earned foreign exchange, not borrowed money.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 18-3-2024

Terms of re-engagement

Maleeha Lodhi

WITH a new government in place in Islamabad, what is the outlook for Pakistan-India relations? Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's congratulatory message to Shehbaz Sharif on his election as prime minister generated speculation in both countries about the future of ties between the two neighbours. The message, however, was terse by past standards, as it contained no reference to any desire to improve relations. Sharif's response was equally curt. In any case, reading anything more into a perfunctory exchange of messages would be a mistake given the complex and fraught nature of the relationship.

The diplomatic impasse between the two countries has persisted since August 2019, when relations plunged to a new low with India's illegal annexation, bifurcation and absorption of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir into the Indian union — in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions. Formal dialogue and the peace process were suspended by India long before this. But Delhi's 2019 action, accompanied by a prolonged lockdown in occupied Kashmir and sweeping restrictions, prompted Pakistan to suspend trade and downgrade diplomatic ties by recalling its high commissioner.

Islamabad made the resumption of dialogue contingent upon India rescinding its August 2019 action. Delhi showed no interest in any talks, and instead, continued its repressive policy and human rights violations in Kashmir. It undertook a slew of legal, demographic, and electoral changes aimed at disempowering and dispossessing Kashmiri Muslims, dismissing Pakistan's protests in this regard.

However back-channel communication between the two countries during 2020-2021 raised hopes of a limited thaw. This led to the re-commitment by both neighbours in February 2021 to observe the ceasefire on the Line of Control, in accordance with a 2003 understanding. This

was not unimportant, as only two years earlier, the nuclear neighbours were locked in a dangerous confrontation in the Pulwama-Balakot crisis, triggered by Indian air strikes inside Pakistani territory. The LoC truce has mostly held for the past three years. But back-channel talks made no headway on any other front, including Kashmir, that could pave the way for a resumption of talks. The diplomatic deadlock continued even though sporadic communication on practical issues did take place, including on exchange of prisoners and visas for visits to religious sites.

In January 2023 Shehbaz Sharif, in his first stint as prime minister, called for "serious and sincere talks" with India to resolve "burning issues", including Kashmir. In an interview with Al Arabiya, he said neighbours needed to live peacefully and voiced his willingness for talks. A subsequent official clarification reaffirmed Pakistan's position that talks could only take place if India reversed its August 2019 action. Delhi responded by saying the atmosphere wasn't conducive for talks.

Nevertheless, foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's May 2023 visit to India to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit offered an opportunity for at least some tentative re-engagement. But this proved a lost opportunity as no bilateral meeting took place on the sidelines. Instead, both sides engaged in mutual recriminations, with India's foreign minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, accusing Bilawal of being the "spokesperson of a terrorism industry".

Meanwhile, another irritant was added last year to the troubled relationship already burdened by several unresolved disputes. This was over the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960, which for six decades has survived wars, confrontations and tensions between the two countries. The stance Delhi adopted raised questions about the fate of the treaty that governs the sharing and management of trans-border rivers. In early 2023, India notified Islamabad of its intention to modify the treaty's dispute settlement provisions. It also boycotted a court of arbitration hearing at the Hague on Indian hydroelectric projects on Chenab and Jhelum rivers disputed by water-stressed Pakistan. The matter remains unresolved.

It is against this fraught backdrop that prospects for Pakistan-India relations have to be assessed. For a start, India is about to go to the polls with general elections expected in April-May. So, any diplomatic move would have to wait until after the outcome of the election. Whether Modi's BJP resorts to its usual Pakistan-bashing during the election campaign may provide an indication of its intentions. Election rhetoric apart, India has already made it clear that Kashmir will no longer figure as a subject in any bilateral dialogue with Pakistan and that it is now off the negotiating table.

Dealing with India will pose an imposing challenge for the Sharif government in the face of this intransigent

Indian position. There are two views about re-engagement with India. The first is that Pakistan should resume trade, restore diplomatic relations at high commissioner level and put Kashmir aside — a reversal of its well-known position. This, however, would still be contingent on how serious India is on renewing formal dialogue with Pakistan. The second view is that such engagement will entirely be on India's terms and tantamount to de facto endorsement of its August 2019 action and virtual abandonment of Kashmir. India has long wanted normalisation of ties without any settlement of outstanding disputes; accepting these terms would imply Pakistan has given up on its claims in these disputes. This would be next to impossible for any government to sell to the public. Therefore, Pakistan should play for time until it has strengthened its negotiating hand and also built economic strength for substantive re-engagement. After all, Pakistan has lived without a dialogue for well over five years.

The question that arises is whether there is any space between these two views or options that can enable Pakistan to establish some kind of working relationship with India — obviously on the basis of reciprocity, while not compromising on its principled, legal position on Kashmir? The need for a working relationship between the two nuclear neighbours cannot be disputed. Regular communication is essential to manage tensions and minimise the risk of miscalculation. There are also practical issues that need sustained dialogue. The restoration of high commissioner-level diplomatic relations, for example, can help in this regard and doesn't compromise any of Pakistan's core interests. Even if this space is limited, it is worth exploring to find a way of extricating the relationship from its frozen state but without breaching Pakistan's clearly articulated red lines on core issues.

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.

THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE, ISLAMABAD 29-3-2024

US aversion to gas pipeline

Washington's dictate disallowing gas transmission initiative between Pak-Iran to go ahead in contravention of waivers

Pakistan's energy acquisition policy seems to be mired in some deep confusion. The defunct Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline project is a case in point. The new dictate from Washington that it will not allow the bilateral gas transmission initiative to go ahead between Islamabad and Tehran is in contravention of many of the stated waivers that other countries are availing with reference to international sanctions. India is a prime example that has high-profile trade and investment relations with Russia, and is a recipient of subsidised oil from the

Kremlin. But when it comes to Pakistan, the prism of geo-economic gets jaundiced, and the US starts treating both countries with abject bias and irrationality.

At the same time, Pakistan lacks a formal policy line of action and is seen swinging between the pendulum. Its decision last month to start building an 80km segment of the pipeline linking Gwadar to the Iranian border was on the spot. In doing so, it not only reconnected the missing dots in energy pursuit but also made a lawful stride in warding off \$18 billion penalties from Tehran. The somersault now to go and ask for the US largesse in the form of a waiver was not required, which ultimately has drawn retribution from a State Department official. This is confusion at its best and, at times, hints at an apologetic approach. The US meddling in the region has come with a heavy price tag for Pakistan. America's desire to see Pakistan distance itself from the multi-billion dollar CPEC was manifested in its dictation from the IMF platform, and likewise it wants to scuttle the pipeline project with Iran. This will be an antithesis of regionalism and sovereignty, and Pakistan must stand up to defend itself from such maneuverings. The need is to foment a viable energy policy and differentiate it from litigations of sanctions drawn on the premise of otherness. In no way is the IP gas pipeline a source of abetting terrorism or a threat to US interests in the region. Obstructing it is nothing but partisanship.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 29-3-2024

China condemns Philippines' trick of 'playing victim'

By GT Staff Reporters

Chinese authorities on Thursday criticized the Philippines' tricks of "playing victim" in the South China Sea and reiterated that China will not allow it to act willfully and has sufficient strategic resolve.

Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Hua Chunying posted on X, formerly known as Twitter, on Tuesday that the Philippines always arranges for reporters in their missions to manipulate videos recorded to make sensational news and project the Philippines as a victim.

Although the Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines (FCAP) denied the accusations in a statement, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said at Thursday's routine press briefing that the FCAP's statement confused right and wrong and China firmly deplores it.

"Who's been stirring up trouble and making provocations on the South China Sea issue? Who's been breaching the common understandings between our two countries and reneged on their own commitments? Who's been staging a show and hyping up tensions?"

Who's been pulling forces outside the region to interfere in the issue?" Lin asked, adding that China has explained the real situation on different occasions.

"Whenever the Philippines carries out an operation in the South China Sea, it brings journalists along, including photo journalists from third countries. Why would the Philippines do that?" Lin asked, adding that he believes anyone fair-minded and unbiased can see that.

Reporting facts and truth is the duty of reporters, and it is hoped that related organizations and reporters adhere to an objective stance and report the truth comprehensively and accurately, Lin said.

Also on Thursday, Defense Ministry spokesperson Wu Qian said at a routine press briefing that the Philippines' harassment and provocations are the direct cause of the recent escalation of the South China Sea issue. Counting on the support of external forces, the Philippine side violated international law and the spirit of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), frequently infringing upon China's sovereignty, made provocations and created trouble, and spread misinformation to mislead the international community.

"China will not allow the Philippines to act willfully, so we have responded with legitimate, resolute and restrained actions. The Philippine side should realize that provocations will only do itself more harm than good, and soliciting foreign support will lead nowhere," Wu said.

Both Lin and Wu pointed to US intervention as a destructive factor in the South China Sea issue.

Wu noted there is no bigger factor than the US interference in causing turbulence in the region. The US, in disregard of the facts, provoked confrontation, backed up the Philippines, threatened and exerted pressure on China citing the so-called bilateral treaty, and sent military vessels to the South China Sea to stir up troubles. These actions seriously undermine regional peace and stability.

China's attitude toward this is clear: the US is in no position to interfere and the military cooperation between the US and the Philippines must not harm China's sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.

Chen Xiangmiao, director of the World Navy Research Center at the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, told the Global Times on Thursday that the smear campaign against China was carefully plotted and realized through US-Philippine collusion.

The US has always been skillful in such slandering actions, and transplanted this method to the Philippines. The reporters on board were carefully selected and their reporting was manipulated to represent the Philippine perspective only, analysts said.

From leaders and politicians to media and think tanks, the Philippines and the US have conspired in the big farce to demonize China and mobilized other allies to amplify their voice in an attempt to mislead international community, Chen said, calling on the Chinese side to fight back with on-site photos, videos and comprehensive facts.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 22-3-2024

China firmly opposes U.S. interference in China-India boundary question

BEIJING, March 21 (Xinhua) -- China strongly deplores and firmly opposes U.S. interference in the China-India boundary question, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said on Thursday.

Lin's remarks came after the U.S. State Department spokesperson said that the United States recognizes the so-called "Arunachal Pradesh", which is China's Zangnan, as Indian territory.

"The China-India boundary has never been delimited," said Lin at a regular press briefing, adding that Zangnan is China's territory, a basic fact that is undeniable.

Lin said the China-India boundary question is a matter between the two countries and has nothing to do with the U.S. side.

"It is known to all that the United States has consistently spared no efforts to provoke and take advantage of other countries' conflicts to serve its selfish geopolitical interests," said Lin.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 30-3-2024

China, US business communities want cooperation instead of 'decoupling': China's trade promotion agency

Both sides show strong desire to strengthen exchanges

By GT Staff Reporters

It is obvious to all that the business communities of China and the US are voting with "their feet" on China's economy, and want cooperation instead of "decoupling." This is also what the people of the two countries want and what they hope for in China-US relations, China's trade promotion agency said on Friday.

At the invitation of US commerce chambers, the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) plans to organize a delegation of Chinese entrepreneurs to visit the US in June to increase exchanges.

The remarks came in response to a recent meeting between China's top leader and a number of US representatives, indicating that China is now paying more attention to exchanges with the American people at all levels and the business community, analysts said.

Chinese President Xi Jinping met with representatives of the US business, strategic and academic communities at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Wednesday, according to the Xinhua News Agency.

"The two countries' respective success is an opportunity for each other. As long as both sides see each other as partners and show mutual respect, coexist in peace and cooperate for win-win results, China-US relations will get better," the Chinese top leader said.

Just as the Chinese president has stressed, the foundation of China-US relations lies among the people, the hope is in the people, the future lies in the youth, and the vitality lies in sub-national areas, Yang Fan, a spokesperson for the CCPIT, told the Global Times on Friday during a regular press conference.

"As the country's largest trade and investment promotion agency and the spokesperson of Chinese industrial and commercial enterprises, the CCPIT has always taken it as an important mission to deepen exchanges and cooperation between the business communities of China and the US," Yang said.

In fact, US companies are still heavily involved in the Chinese market and are confident in China's economic development and vast market potential.

According to a recent survey by the American Chamber of Commerce in China, the majority of US companies saw improved profitability in China in 2023, and half of the survey participants put China as their first choice or within their top three investment destinations globally.

One of the latest examples was the just-concluded China Development Forum (CDF) 2024, held from Sunday to Monday in Beijing, during which more than 30 percent of the over 80 business executives attending the forum came from the US.

This figure is strong evidence indicating the US business sector's unabated commitment to the China market, in stark contrast to the "decoupling" narrative promoted by some US politicians.

"The Chinese economy is always going to be a very significant economy and a very significant driver of global growth, and I don't think that's different this year as opposed to any other," Timothy Creber, general manager at the China Operation of American Express, told the Global Times at the sidelines of the CDF 2024.

"The opportunities are huge and the opportunity to continue to partner with different institutions in this market is very good. So we're very confident about the Chinese economy over the coming years," said Creber.

On March 5, the first session of the US-China Commercial Match-Making Program (CMP) in 2024 was held in Southwest China's Chongqing, after bringing together more than 130 entrepreneurs from China and the US.

CMP was jointly launched by the CCPIT and the US Department of Commerce in 2005. Over the past 19 years, the two sides have held more than 100 themed matching events in advanced manufacturing, rail transit, energy conservation, environmental protection, financial services, automobile technology, tourism and culture, and investment cooperation, benefiting more than 2,000 Chinese and US companies.

"During the CMP session in March this year, we saw warm on-site exchanges and interactions, which shows the strong desire of the Chinese and American business communities to strengthen exchanges and cooperation," Yang said.

Unlike the US and some Western countries that closed their previously open doors to the outside world for political reasons, China has always welcomed global companies to operate and develop in the Chinese market and share the dividends of its market potential, Li Yong, a senior research fellow at the China Association of International Trade, told the Global Times.

China has taken a slew of measures to expand market access for foreign businesses, including those from the US, so as to achieve greater integration of industrial interests, "make the cake of economic interests bigger" and achieve win-win results, analysts pointed out.

"From the perspective of the US business community, their interests are closely linked to those of the Chinese business community. Therefore, the US business community has an intrinsic motivation to promote the development of China-US relations," said Li.

However, analysts warned that the US government is constantly trying to suppress China's development. China expects both sides to meet each other halfway, but at the same time China should also be prepared for the worst.

In particular, the US' technological war against China is bound to continue, because technological hegemony is one of its strategic fundamental interests, Zhang Xiaorong, director of the Beijing-based Cutting-Edge Technology Research Institute, told the Global Times on Friday.

The US knows it can't "decouple" from China, but it is increasingly nervous seeing China's rapid technological rise, Zhang noted.

The CCPIT also said on Friday during the press conference that US acts, such as the so-called "Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act" and US export control measures, are still causes of concern for Chinese enterprises.

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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 22-3-2024**Enforcement Directorate arrests Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi excise policy case***Delhi CM's petition for urgent hearing likely to come up on Friday***PTI**

New Delhi, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Thursday night in an excise policy-linked money-laundering case, officials said.

The arrest, the first of a sitting chief minister, came hours after the Delhi High Court refused to grant protection to the AAP national convener from any coercive action by the agency.

Kejriwal was taken to the ED headquarters at 11 pm, nearly two hours after his arrest at around 9 pm. He will spend the night at the ED headquarters.

The 55-year-old leader's arrest, amid campaign for the Lok Sabha elections, drew angry reactions from his Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Soon after the high court order, an ED team reached his residence and carried out searches. Subsequently, he was arrested, officials said.

Officials said the ED would produce the chief minister before a court here on Friday and seek his custody for interrogation.

As the ED officials carried out their action inside, additional Delhi Police personnel and Rapid Action Force (RAF) and CRPF teams were deployed around the chief minister's residence.

The additional deployment was made as the ED sought extra security measures in anticipation of protests by AAP supporters, sources said.

A large number of AAP workers and leaders gathered near the chief minister's residence and shouted slogans against the ED action.

During the day, Kejriwal moved the Supreme Court against the high court's order denying him relief in the matter.

The ED's action is virtually a replay of what transpired during the arrest last week of Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) leader K Kavitha, who is now in ED custody in the same case.

The case pertains to alleged corruption and money-laundering in formulating and executing the Delhi government's excise policy for 2021-22, which was later scrapped.

AAP leaders Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh are in judicial custody in the case.

Kejriwal's name has been mentioned multiple times in the charge sheets filed by the ED. The agency has alleged that the accused were in touch with Kejriwal for formulating the excise policy that resulted in undue benefits to them in return for which they paid kickbacks to the AAP.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 20-3-2024**BJP will cross 400 seats, Modi will become PM for third time:****Nitin Gadkari****Shriya Ganguly**

Union minister of road transport and highways Nitin Gadkari said every project of the government was executed in a transparent, non-corrupt and time-bound manner

Union minister of road transport and highways Nitin Gadkari on Tuesday dismissed the allegations of corruption in electoral bond scheme and said that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will return to power in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Speaking at the News18 Rising Bharat Summit, Gadkari said he did not want to make any comment on the electoral bond scheme as it would amount to contempt of court since the matter is sub judice in the Supreme Court. However, reacting to the allegations that the BJP had engaged in corruption through the scheme and a large share of donations to the party came from infrastructure companies, Gadkari said the government had not awarded a single tender for infrastructure projects without e-tenders.

"I have awarded work worth 25 lakh crores in 10 years. In water issues, in shipping, and later in the roads sector, ropeways, cable cars, tunnels, express highways, we have not done even one work without e-tenders. [...] Every project was executed in a manner transparent, non-corrupt, time-bound and committed to quality," he said, and claimed that he was ready to face the punishment if even a single person came forward and said that they had been asked to pay money to get work from the government.

Looking back at his ministry's work in the last 10 years, Gadkari said that although there had been great strides in the building of tunnels, bridges, expressways and more, the achievement he was personally most proud of was bringing e-rickshaws to replace cycle or hand-drawn rickshaws. "One crore people who were being exploited have been freed, and they are driving e-rickshaws," he said.

He said he was certain that the upcoming elections would see three "hat tricks"—the BJP winning 400 seats and becoming the first party other than the Congress to have a third term in power, Narendra Modi becoming Prime Minister for the third time, and Gadkari himself winning the Nagpur seat for the third time.

He claimed the INDIA bloc would be defeated, but said that he believed in emphasising the achievements of the NDA government in the last 10 years to win the people's support rather than negatively targeting the Opposition.

In response to the controversy regarding the government's recent notification of the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act, Gadkari said, "It is very clear that if

the people of the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and Jain faiths go to foreign countries and are removed from there, they do not have the right to go to any country. So naturally, our Constitution says that they can be given citizenship in India.”

On his home state Maharashtra, he said that decisions regarding seat-sharing with the Shiv Sena had been “mostly finalised”, and that the alliance would win a resounding victory in the state. He also said that Chief Minister Eknath Shinde had worked out a “solution” to the demand for Maratha reservation in the state, and that it was no longer an issue.

He declined to comment on Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) leader Raj Thackeray’s visit to Delhi and reports that he would be joining the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance. He said any decision on this would be taken by the party leadership who are in talks with him.

Gadhkari also said that former Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray’s public offer to give him a ticket from the Maharashtra Vikas Agadi (MVA) was “laughable”, and there was no question of him joining any other party.

“I started my life as a Sangh Swayamsevak and an ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad) Karyakarta. And whatever I am today, and whatever goodness is in me, is because of these two organisations. So, everything is good. I am very much proud of my convictions. If I am good, so is my party. And if I am good, so is my ideology,” he said.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 20-3-2024
Modi's '400 paar' claim 'hollow', INDIA bloc will get clear majority to form government: Bhupesh Baghel

In an interview with PTI, the former Chhattisgarh chief minister also claimed that the Lok Sabha polls will be Narendra Modi versus the "whole of India".

PTI, New Delhi/Rajnandgaon

Terming Prime Minister Narendra Modi's '400 paar' claim as "hollow", senior Congress leader Bhupesh Baghel on Tuesday said the BJP's Ram temple pitch "would not make much of a difference" in the Lok Sabha polls and exuded confidence that the INDIA bloc will get a clear majority to form the next government.

In an interview with PTI, the former Chhattisgarh chief minister also claimed that the Lok Sabha polls will be Narendra Modi versus the "whole of India".

He expressed confidence that the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) will get a majority to form the government at the Centre, while the Congress would be victorious in more than half of the 11 Lok Sabha seats in Chhattisgarh.

Asked about whether the INDIA bloc was still strong enough to take on the BJP despite JD(U) chief Nitish Kumar switching over to the NDA and TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee deciding to go solo, Baghel said, "Our

natural alliance partners are with us, in fact our alliance has expanded with the likes of Uddhav Thackeray, Prakash Ambedkar along with several small parties joining us." "So our alliance is strong, in fact there are tensions in the National Democratic Alliance camp. You can see in Haryana, there is push and pull between uncle and nephew in Bihar (Chirag Paswan and Pashupati Paras), in Uttar Pradesh also (Om Prakash) Rajbhar and Apna Dal faction are also upset with seat distribution. So we don't see anyone going with them and more people are leaving their alliance," he claimed.

On suggestions that a Ram temple wave was being experienced in north India, Baghel said the BJP is giving the slogan "Jisne Ram ko laya hai, usko hum layenge" but everyone is the son or daughter of God.

"Who are these people to bring Ram. This would not make much of a difference (in the polls)," he told PTI over phone while campaigning in Rajnandgaon.

Asked about contesting from Rajnandgaon being a risk considering it is a BJP bastion, Baghel asserted there is no risk.

"Will win easily, it is a very good seat. Former BJP CM Raman Singh had been an MP from here but before that another former Chief Minister Motilal Vora was also an MP from here. It depends how one fights," the former Chhattisgarh CM said.

Acknowledging that since the formation of Chhattisgarh, the Congress has not won more than two seats in Lok Sabha polls, Baghel said there have been various reasons for that.

"But right now the situation is that the assembly poll results surprised people, they thought 'how did this happen'. It was in people's hearts that the government had to be repeated. So with the regret people have in their hearts that the government could not be repeated, we will benefit from that in these polls in Chhattisgarh," he said.

Baghel argued there was no wave in favour of the BJP in north India.

"If there would have been a wave then its leaders would not have withdrawn their nominations after their name was announced. There would not have been any need to align with Jayant Chaudhary (RLD). What is the intention behind this?" he said.

"They are giving five Bharat Ratnas in a space of few months at the time of polls. So this shows their fear, they are rattled, one can make out from the statements being made by BJP leaders," he claimed.

Baghel also raised the issue of the Supreme Court verdict in the electoral bonds case and hit out at the prime minister.

"He (Modi) used to say that I will end corruption, this is the biggest scam that is out in the open. They are censoring it in the media, it was not published in any Hindi newspapers. The more you want to hide it the more people would seek out that information," he said.

If one hides it, the more it spreads on social media, Baghel added.

"It is a big issue because he had projected his image that I am very honest but it has come to light that this is the biggest scam of the decade. This involves corruption, extortion and protection. 'Chanda do, dhanda lo (give donation, get business)'," he charged.

They would get firms investigated by agencies such as the ED and the CBI and then after donation, no action would be taken against them, he alleged.

"Same thing is being done with opposition leaders, allegations are made against them and probe agencies are unleashed and when they join the BJP they become clean in Modi washing machine," he said.

Baghel said the electoral bonds issue would become the rallying point for the opposition parties.

If one acts opposed to the image that had been projected then people will not like it, he said, in a dig at Prime Minister Modi.

Baghel claimed the FIR against him in the Mahadev online betting case was done to defame him since the BJP anticipates a defeat in the polls.

"There was no FIR in the whole country. The FIR was done in Chhattisgarh and over 70 of them, more than 450 arrests were made, there were seizures of laptops, mobiles, over 1,000 bank accounts and more than 200 ATM cards were seized, so we took action. It is being alleged that I am taking protection money. If I was taking protection money why would I take action," he argued.

"Mahadev app is being run in BJP-ruled states as well so when they are not taking action, they would be getting protection money. There are two directors, they are abroad, we issued a look out circular and it was the Centre's responsibility to nab them," he said.

Baghel termed as "hollow" Prime Minister Modi's claim that the BJP would get at least 370 seats and NDA would be "400 paar" in the Lok Sabha polls.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 20-3-2024

'Ghar ghar guarantee': Congress's manifesto to focus on 'Paanch NYAY', 'Pachees Guarantee'

Addressing a press conference after the CWC meeting, party leaders K C Venugopal and Jairam Ramesh said the CWC has prepared a roadmap for taking the party's guarantees to the grassroots

PTI, New Delhi

The Congress' manifesto for the Lok Sabha polls would focus on "Paanch NYAY" and "Pachees Guarantee", and the party on Tuesday resolved to take its promises to the people with a "ghar ghar guarantee" mantra.

The party's highest decision-making body Congress Working Committee (CWC), which met during the day, authorised Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge to

give the final approval to the manifesto and decide a date for its release.

Addressing a press conference after the CWC meeting, party leaders K C Venugopal and Jairam Ramesh said the CWC has prepared a roadmap for taking the party's guarantees to the grassroots.

Ramesh said the Congress will release not just a "ghoshna patra (manifesto)" but a "nyay patra" so that people see a bright future.

The CWC lauded the guarantees released during Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra and discussed a roadmap to take these to every household in the country.

In a post on X in Hindi, Gandhi said that today in the CWC meeting, there was an in-depth discussion on the party's manifesto, including its "five nyays and 25 guarantees".

"Through the Bharat Jodo Yatra and the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, we continuously went among the people to every village, street and heard the 'voice of the country'. We got to know and understand closely the injustice being done to the people and the struggles of their lives," he said.

"That is why our manifesto and guarantees are not merely a document, but a roadmap derived from dialogue with crores of citizens which is going to change the lives of every section of society through employment revolution and empowered participation," Gandhi said.

Ramesh said the aim is to take the guarantees under the "Panch Nyay" -- "Nari Nyay", "Shramik Nyay", "Kisaan Nyay", "Yuva Nyay" and "Hissedari Nyay" -- to every household with the aim "ghar ghar guarantee".

In his post, Gandhi said, "We will go among the farmers, youth, workers, women and the underprivileged with the pledge of the five nyays and will contest the elections directly on the real issues related to the lives of the people. The guarantees of the Congress are a resolve to bring prosperity in the lives of people." The manifesto of the Congress would focus on the five "nyays" under which it has made 25 guarantees. Under the "Yuva Nyay", the party has promised "Bharti Bharosa" -- 30 lakh new central government jobs, according to a jobs calendar. Under the "Pehli Naukri Pakki", the Congress has promised a one-year paid apprenticeship for all educated youths at Rs 1 lakh a year or Rs 8,500 a month.

The party has promised a law to ensure government recruitment examination question papers are not leaked and also better working conditions and social security for gig workers.

Under its "Yuva Roshni" guarantee, the party has promised a Rs 5,000-crore start-up fund for the youth.

As part of the "Nari Nyay", the Congress has promised the "Mahalakshmi" guarantee of Rs 1 lakh a year for one woman in every poor family.

The party has also promised 50 per cent reservation for women in new central government jobs and double salary contribution of the Centre for all ASHA, anganwadi, and mid-day meal workers.

It has also promised "Adhikar Maitri" in every village to ensure women get their legal rights. The party has also promised doubling the number of hostels for working women. Under "Kisaan Nyay", the Congress has promised a legal guarantee to minimum support price (MSP) for crops at the Swaminathan formula, and a standing loan waiver commission for farmers, if it comes to power.

It has also guaranteed insurance payment within 30 days of crop loss and a stable import-export policy to benefit farmers. The party has also promised no GST on inputs for farming.

As part of its "Shramik Nyay" guarantees, the Congress has promised a right to health law that provides universal healthcare, including free essential diagnostics, medicines, treatment, surgery, and rehabilitative and palliative care. It has also promised a national minimum wage of Rs 400 a day, including all MGNREGS workers.

The Congress has also promised an employment guarantee act for urban areas, life insurance and accident insurance for unorganised workers and stopping contractualisation of employment in core government functions.

Under its "Hissedari Nyay", the party has promised social, economic and caste census. It has also promised removing the 50 per cent cap on SC, ST and OBC reservation through a constitutional amendment and a special budget for SC and ST equal to the share of their population. If it comes to power, the Congress has also vowed to settle Forest Rights Act claims in one year and promised that all habitations where STs are the most populous group will be notified scheduled areas.

The CWC discussed the party's manifesto for the Lok Sabha polls for over three hours and decided to reach out to every household with its five "Nyay" guarantees for the youth, women, workers, farmers and marginalised sections.

Sources said the manifesto also includes the promise of implementing the old pension scheme (OPS) across the country and a law to ensure the independence of constitutional institutions and stop "misuse" of agencies.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 22-3-2024

Bid to cripple Congress: Sonia targets PM on fund freeze

Demands access to bank accounts for level playing field
Tribune News Service

New Delhi, Accusing Prime Minister Narendra Modi of trying to cripple the Congress financially before the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, party's top leader Sonia Gandhi on Thursday demanded that the party be given

access to its bank accounts so that there was a level playing field in the country. Addressing a press conference here, the Congress parliamentary party president said all its bank accounts had been frozen by the Income Tax Department in connection with a 2018 case.

"The issue is very, very serious and affects not just the Indian National Congress — it impacts our democracy itself most fundamentally," Sonia said. She said money from the Congress' accounts had been taken away forcefully by I-T officers. "Systematic efforts are underway by the PM to cripple the Congress financially," she said.

"On the one hand is the electoral bonds issue, on the other, finances of the principal opposition party are under assault," she said.

"Even under these challenges, we are doing our best to maintain effectiveness of our campaign," she asserted.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and former president Rahul Gandhi also addressed the press conference. "Besides knocking the door of the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal and the high court, we are also approaching public regarding the BJP's attempt to cut off Congress' fund flow," party treasurer Ajay Maken said. He said due to the paucity of funds, the Congress was not able to book slots in the print and electronic media for giving advertisements. The party was not able to advertise on social media platforms also due to it, he added.

Rahul said, "We can do no campaign work. Our ability to fight elections has been damaged." He claimed it was not freezing of Congress' accounts, but a "freezing of Indian democracy". "There is no democracy in India today. The proclamation that India is the world's largest democracy is a complete lie," said Rahul, terming the freezing of accounts a criminal action by the PM and the Home Minister. "There are institutions that are supposed to protect the democratic framework, but nothing is happening," Rahul said. Kharge said the BJP amassed funds through electoral bonds while freezing the Congress' accounts to create hurdles for it in contesting the upcoming elections.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 16-3-2024

Lok Sabha polls: Samajwadi Party declares six candidates from Uttar Pradesh, gives 1 seat to Trinamul Congress

The six candidates are Yashveer Singh (Bijnor), Manoj Kumar (Nagina), Bhanu Pratap Singh (Meerut), Bijendra Singh (Aligarh), Jasveer Valmiki (Hathras) and Daroga Saroj (Lalganj), says the party

PTI, Lucknow

The Samajwadi Party on Friday declared six of its candidates from Uttar Pradesh for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

The six candidates are Yashveer Singh (Bijnor), Manoj Kumar (Nagina), Bhanu Pratap Singh (Meerut), Bijendra Singh (Aligarh), Jasveer Valmiki (Hathras) and Daroga Saroj (Lalganj), the party said on X. The SP gave the Bhadohi Lok Sabha seat to the Trinamul Congress.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 17-3-2024
INDIA VOTES 2024: 7-phase Lok Sabha polls from April 19

Results of Parl, four state Assembly polls on June 4, model code comes into effect | Punjab, Himachal, UT vote on June 1; bypoll to 6 HP Assembly seats same day | Polling in Haryana, Delhi on May 25, spread over 5 phases in J&K from April 19

Animesh Singh

New Delhi, The poll bugle was sounded on Saturday as the Election Commission announced the Lok Sabha polls in seven phases from April 19 to June 1 with the counting of votes to take place on June 4.

The elections are crucial for the Congress-led INDIA bloc, which has been relegated to the margins after heavy electoral losses in 2014 and 2019. It aims to match the BJP-led NDA behemoth, which will be eyeing its third straight victory in 2024, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi having set the target of 400-plus seats.

The other five phases will be held on April 26, May 7, May 13, May 20 and May 25, said Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rajiv Kumar at a press conference here. Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and the Union Territory of Chandigarh will vote in the last phase on June 1 and Haryana in the sixth phase on May 25. In Jammu and Kashmir, one seat each — Udhampur, Jammu, Anantnag, Srinagar and Baramulla — will go to the polls in the first five phases. Ladakh seat will vote in the fifth phase.

The Election Commission also announced the schedule for Assembly polls in four states. Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim will see polling on April 19 and Andhra Pradesh on May 13. Odisha elections will be held in four phases on May 13, May 20, May 25 and June 1. Bypolls will also be held to 26 Assembly constituencies across 13 states, including six seats in Himachal where Congress rebels were recently disqualified under the anti-defection law, said the CEC, who was flanked by new Election Commissioners Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu. The counting for all Assembly polls and byelections will also take place on June 4.

In Himachal, the results of the bypolls to the six seats — Dharamsala, Sujampur, Barsar, Kulehar, Gagret and Lahaul-Spiti — could prove to be a gamechanger as the BJP (25 MLAs) will equal the Congress tally of 34 should it win all the six seats and the three Independent legislators continue to support it. The byelection for the

Karnal seat in Haryana, vacated by former Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar, will be held on May 25.

In the first phase of the Lok Sabha elections, voting will be held in 102 seats across 21 states and UTs. The second phase polling will be in 89 seats of 13 states, third phase for 94 seats across 12 states, fourth for 96 seats across 10 states and the fifth for 49 seats in eight states. In the sixth phase, 57 seats will go to the polls in seven states and 57 seats of eight states in the last phase. The CEC explained that one of the two constituencies in Manipur would vote in two phases due to security reasons, which took the overall tally of Lok Sabha seats to 544 instead of 543. The elections to the two Lok Sabha seats in the state will be held in two phases on April 19 and 26. Inner Manipur and some segments of Outer Manipur will vote in the first phase on April 19 while the remaining segments of Outer Manipur will vote in the second phase on April 26.

Arunachal Pradesh, which has 60 Assembly and two Lok Sabha seats, will vote simultaneously on April 19, so will Sikkim, which has 32 Assembly and two Lok Sabha constituencies. The voting for 175 Assembly seats and 25 Lok Sabha seats in Andhra Pradesh will be held on May 13. Odisha will vote for the 224-member Assembly poll alongside the 21 Lok Sabha seats in four phases on May 13, 20, 25 and June 1. The Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir would be held soon after the Lok Sabha elections, Kumar said, adding that simultaneous elections were not viable due to the shortage of security personnel. He said security would have to be provided to each candidate.

Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal will witness polling in all the seven phases, while Karnataka, Rajasthan, Tripura and Manipur will have polling in two phases. Chhattisgarh and Assam will witness polling in three phases while Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand will vote in four phases. Maharashtra and Jammu and Kashmir will have polling in five phases. Kumar said the poll panel was determined to cut down the use of muscle and money power during the elections and appealed to all political parties to keep the electioneering process within the parameters of dignity and decency, urging them to stay away from making personalised attacks and hate speeches.

He also sent out a strong message on the circulation of fake news on social media, saying political parties should ensure responsible social media behaviour — “verify before you amplify”. “Fake news will be dealt with severely as per provisions of law. The IT Act empowers nodal officers in each state to remove unlawful content,” he said.

1.8 crore first-timers

18-19 years **1.82 cr** (85L female)

20-29 years **19.74 cr**

Above 85 years **82 lakh**

Differently abled **88.4 lakh**

Centenarians **2.18 lakh**

Transgenders **48,000**

A first: Vote from home for 85+

Voters aged 85 and above will get to vote from home, if they opt for it. A form will be sent to those eligible for opting for vote from home/booth.

Simultaneous Assembly elections in 4 states

Assembly polls in four states will be held alongside Lok Sabha elections: Arunachal (60 seats) and Sikkim (32) on April 19; Andhra Pradesh (175) on May 13 and Odisha (224) on May 13, 20, 25 and June 1.

Assembly bypolls to 6 seats in Himachal

Bypolls to 26 Assembly seats in 13 states, including six seats in Himachal where Congress rebels were recently disqualified, will be held alongside LS poll. Karnal, from where ex-CM ML Khattar resigned, will see byelection on May 25.

Number of Women voters on the rise

The gender ratio has risen from 928 in 2019 Lok Sabha poll to 948 in 2024

12 states have more female voters than male (voter gender ratio over 1,000)

There are 85 lakh female voters among the 1.82 crore first-time voters

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 17-3-2024

INDIA VOTES 2024: CEC: No adequate forces for simultaneous polls in J&K

Assembly elections to be held soon after Lok Sabha results: Rajiv Kumar

Ajay Banerjee

New Delhi, Elections to the Legislative Assembly of the J&K can't be conducted with the general election as enough security forces will not be made available for the Assembly and Lok Sabha polls simultaneously, said Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rajiv Kumar while addressing a press conference today. The CEC said simultaneous polls were considered, however, "the entire administrative machinery of J&K requested that simultaneous polls are not possible".

"The EC stands committed. Immediately after this election, we will conduct the Assembly election as soon as possible as we will have availability of forces," Rajiv Kumar added. The Assembly in J&K was dissolved in November 2018 and scrapping of the Article 370 of the Constitution in August 2019 converted the erstwhile state into a UT and also reorganised the state into two parts – J&K being one and Ladakh being the other.

The CEC said all political parties asked for polls along with Lok Sabha polls. Explaining the issue of security, he said each of the 90 Assembly constituencies would have 10-12 candidates. That would mean about 1,000 candidates in all. "We will have to provide security to each candidate and need 450 extra companies of security forces". 450 extra companies would translate into nearly 42,000-45,000 troops.

"So many companies were not possible to be made available," the CEC said. Addressing questions on delay in conducting Assembly polls in J&K, Rajiv Kumar said everything fell into place only in December 2023. "So our time (to take action) started only in December," he added.

Explaining the delay, the CEC said the J&K Reorganisation Act was passed in 2019. It mandated for 107 seats, of which 24 were reserved for Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), leaving 83 seats. Of these, seven were reserved for Scheduled Castes (SC) and none for Scheduled Tribes (ST). In 2022, the Delimitation Commission gave its report and it was accepted. This changed the number of seats in the Assembly. Now, there are 114 seats, of which 24 are for PoK, thus leaving 90 seats. The commission added nine seats for the ST, two for migrants and one seat for nomination of person displaced from PoK.

"For us, this meant the Re-organisation Act and the Delimitation Act was not in sync and there was no occasion for commission to conduct elections till everything was in place, and this happened in December 2023," he added.

Meanwhile, the Lok Sabha elections in Jammu and Kashmir will be conducted in five phases with voting in each of the five parliamentary constituencies of the Union Territory to be held in each phase, according to the poll schedule announced by the Election Commission.

The voting for the Lok Sabha seats of Udhampur, Jammu, Anantnag, Srinagar and Baramulla will take place on April 19, April 26, May 7, May 13 and May 20.

The Ladakh Lok Sabha seat, spread over Kargil and Leh districts will go to polls in the fifth phase of polls.

(With PTI inputs)

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 17-3-2024

Compared to 2019, female voters up by 9.3% in 2024

Animesh Singh

New Delhi, While almost 97 crore citizens will be entitled to vote in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections, a rise of 8.1 per cent over 2019 general elections (when the figure was 89.6 crore voters), the increase of female voters has been 9.3 per cent during the same period, according to the Election Commission of India (ECI) data after electoral rolls revision.

Between 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha polls, female voters have grown 9.3 per cent, from 43 crore to 47 crore. During the same period, male voters have risen 6.9 per cent, from 46.4 crore to 49.7 crore.

In addition, 1.85 crore first time voters in the 18-19 age group have also been added to the latest rolls, which is a 22.7 per cent rise in the last five years. The data was shared by Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rajiv

Kumar at a press conference to announce 2024 Lok Sabha polls] schedule.

Also young voters (those aged between 18-29 years), are now 21.6 crore, forming 22 per cent of the country's electorate. Gender ratio of electors (number of female voters per 1,000 male voters) has also improved significantly to 948 in 2024 from 928 in 2019, with over four crore female voters having been added since 2019, as compared to 3.2 crore male voters. Kumar further said the poll body had received 10 lakh advance applications for enrolment from 17 years plus youths.

For the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, there will be 10.5 lakh voting stations and 55 lakh EVMs as well as 1.5 crore officials, who will be deployed for poll duty. Persons with disabilities number 88.4 lakh among electorates while 82 lakh voters are in the age group of 85 years and above. Voters aged 100 years and above are 2.18 lakh in number.

Improved Gender ratio

Gender ratio of electors (number of female voters per 1,000 male voters) has increased to 948 in 2024 from 928 in 2019.

Young voters, aged between 18 and 29 years, are now 21.6 crore forming 22 per cent of the country's electorate

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 17-3-2024

Lok Sabha polls: Persons above 85, those with more than 40 pc disability can vote from home, says EC

There are 82 lakh registered voters who are above 85, while number of PwD voters is 88.4 lakh

PTI

New Delhi, For the first time in Lok Sabha elections, people above 85 years of age and those with more than 40 per cent disability will be able to cast their votes from home, Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar announced on Saturday.

"We are ready to take vote at home for those above the age of 85 years, before nominations we will send form 12 D to their homes to choose the option.

"We have tried this in some parts of the country earlier in assembly elections but this is the first time it will be implemented across the country," Kumar said while addressing a press conference to announce the schedule of the Lok Sabha elections.

"If they choose the option of voting from home, we will conduct voting for them at their residence. Our experience is that majority of these people want to come to the booths because they have consistently been part of our democracy... they will have volunteers and wheelchairs if they come to the booth," he added.

According to Kumar, there are 82 lakh registered voters who are aged above 85 years, while the number of PwD voters is 88.4 lakh.

A total of 2.18 lakh centenarians are also part of the electoral rolls.

The CEC said there are 97.8 crore eligible voters of which 49.72 crore are male voters and 47.1 crore are female voters. The polls for 543 Lok Sabha seats will be held in seven phases, starting with voting for 102 seats in the first phase on April 19. The counting of votes will be held on June 4.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 16-3-2024

Bonds not black money, what's the ruckus all about, asks Shah

Says BJP got Rs 6,000 crore for 303 MPs, others Rs 14,000 crore for 242

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Friday defended the electoral bonds saying these do not represent black money, and asked the Opposition what the entire ruckus about the bonds was.

"Electoral bonds were introduced to end the dominance of black money in politics. Earlier money was taken in cash. Did that transaction ever become public? It has been said that the electoral bonds have benefitted the BJP. Now, Rahul Gandhi says it is the biggest extortion activity. Let me state clearly — BJP has got approximately Rs 6,000 crore, TMC has got Rs 1,600 crore, Congress got Rs 1,400 crore, BRS got Rs 1,200 crore, BJD got Rs 750 crore and DMK got Rs 639 crore. The BJP has got Rs 6,000 crore despite having 303 MPs and the rest of the parties have got Rs 14,000 crore against 242 MPs. So what's the ruckus about? Once the accounts are taken from other parties, they will not be able to face you all," Shah said at a TV channel event. He asked whether big industrial conglomerates made political donations after Independence. "If yes, where are the accounts for that?" asked the Home Minister. He said bonds were not black money, because everything is shown in the balance sheet of the company.

"The money that earlier used to flow to the parties was secret and hence that was black money," Shah added.

Noting that he fully respects the Supreme Court order on electoral bonds, Shah said the scheme was introduced to end black money in politics and added that it should have been improved rather than scrapped.

Shah also said that the one nation, one election is the concept of the BJP and PM Narendra Modi and when it will be implemented, it will ensure faster development and end recurring expenditure.

Referring to the Congress, the home minister said the leaders of the opposition party used to take political donation in cash because out of a donation of Rs 1,100, they used to deposit Rs 100 in the name of the party and keep Rs 1,000 in their own pockets.

"The Congress party has run this system for years," he said. (With PTI inputs)

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 16-3-2024
12 firms bought poll bonds after action
by probe agencies

Sandeep Dikshit & Animesh Singh

New Delhi, Over a dozen cases have emerged where companies under the scanner of Central agencies purchased electoral bonds worth crores of rupees, a few months or even days after their premises were raided.

Leading the pack is the lottery company, Future Gaming, which purchased electoral bonds worth Rs 1,326 crore. A raid by the ED on April 2, 2022, was followed by purchase of electoral bonds five days later.

Pharma major Aurobindo Pharma bought electoral bonds worth Rs 52 crore and half of this amount was donated five months after the owner turned approver in the Delhi excise policy case. The company also bought bonds five days after the arrest of its managing director. Shirdi Sai Electricals bought electoral bonds worth Rs 40 crore, all on the same date in early January, after being raided by the Income Tax Department in December last year.

The same was the case with Hero Motocorp, which was raided on March 31. It purchased bonds on October 7. Dr Reddy's also purchased bonds on November 17, 2023, after an I-T raid just four days earlier. Kalapataru Projects bought Rs 25.5 crore worth of electoral bonds between April and October 2023, after an I-T raid on August 4, 2023.

Similarly, Micro Labs was raided by the Income Tax Department on July 14, 2022. It bought electoral bonds worth Rs 5 crore three months later.

Hetero Group bought Rs 60 crore bonds during April 2022 after it was raided by the I-T Department six months earlier in October 2021. Two companies of the RP Sanjiv Goenka Group also donated shortly after being pulled up by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG).

Construction firm Chennai Green Woods Pvt Ltd bought electoral bonds worth Rs 105 crore in tranches after it was raided by the I-T Department in July 2021.

THE HINDU, DELHI 29-3-2024

Did the electoral bonds scheme enable extortion?

Vignesh Radhakrishnan

Many companies purchased bonds worth crores of rupees after ED/IT action. Most of these funds went to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); some went to the ruling parties in various States. Some have called this scheme an extortion tool? Do you agree?

Anjali Bhardwaj: Data in the public domain shows that several companies that were under the scrutiny of the ED, the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation), and the IT Department bought electoral bonds. A significant portion of these were encashed by the ruling party at the

Centre. This raises two questions. The first is whether agencies were being used to target companies and extract funds from them. The second is whether companies with cases against them made donations to ruling parties in the hope that the investigations against them would go slow or be dropped altogether. These will have to be a subject matter of deeper investigation.

Subhash Chandra Garg: I trust the investigative analysis that civil society has been doing after the data became available. It is also possible to connect the time of action by investigating agencies and the date on which electoral bonds were purchased. But those who purchased the bonds perhaps trusted the anonymity which this scheme was designed to provide. They would have possibly avoided this route had confidentiality been in doubt. So, this scrutiny might not have been possible without the transparency of the scheme; donations could have remained untraceable. Strong correlations can also be seen between companies making large donations and receiving high-value government contracts. Is it right to treat these cases as quid pro quo?

Subhash Chandra Garg: Quid pro quo is a common practice. Companies donate not out of altruism but to serve their business interests, whether it is to secure contracts or to get protection. The existence of quid pro quo in political donations is often seen as the primary motivation behind such contributions. The electoral bonds scheme was seen as a way of making political donations more transparent, using legitimate funds for donations, while maintaining confidentiality. It was quid pro quo but in a more transparent way.

Anjali Bhardwaj: Quid pro quo is nothing new. Political party funding has been the fountainhead of corruption in India. Companies do not donate in public interest; they donate to influence policy and law, and give kickbacks to secure contracts. To be sure, this was happening before the introduction of the electoral bonds scheme as well. Some of these transactions were taking place through banking channels and a lot of them through cash. And unless somebody was caught red-handed, quid pro quo was impossible to establish. So, what's the difference? Earlier, regulators had information on what was coming through the banking channels, but the electoral bonds scheme made even that information opaque. The main contention of the government counsel was that the scheme was brought in to reduce cash. The Supreme Court then asked a few questions. First, with the scheme, has there been a ban on accepting cash? The answer was 'no'. So, along with the scheme, donations through cash continued. Second, although it was expressly forbidden to trade electoral bonds, in reality, there were no safeguards against trading these bonds. Anyone who had money in the bank could buy these bonds and these bonds could then be traded. So, effectively, money gets laundered. The Court weighed these issues against the intended benefits

of the scheme and found the loss of transparency and public rights more significant.

Names of purchasers of electoral bonds and the redeeming parties were never supposed to be in the public domain. Had there not been a judgment or had the SBI not recorded this alphanumeric number, citizens would have never known what was happening.

Subhash Chandra Garg: The argument that cash donations should have been stopped is inaccurate. Cash donations were transparent if they were above 20,000; this number was then brought down to 2,000. This was as good as banning cash transactions. After the electoral bonds scheme was introduced, cash donations reduced.

The anonymity between donors and political parties was designed to protect companies from potential retribution. The debate on the public's right to know donor identities overlooks the privacy of business transactions, which are not typically disclosed to the public or to the government. These include sales, purchases, and patents. The electoral bonds scheme, however, allowed some transparency, as companies disclosed political donations in their financial statements, providing a balance between anonymity and public interest in political financing. I also have to say that the government interferes with our culture of doing business. High taxes and numerous regulations, alongside the government as a major player in sectors such as electricity, mean businesses often have to please the government to succeed. Electoral bonds is a symptom of the sorry state of affairs of doing business in the country. The solution isn't just to blame companies but to make it easier to do business. Some companies donated crores of rupees months after getting incorporated. Some that started during the COVID-19 pandemic donated more than 30 crore within a year. Many of them do not even have a website. Some companies donated more than 50 crore despite facing losses in a financial year. What could these findings indicate?

Subhash Chandra Garg: The decision to allow loss-making companies to donate by removing the profit cap aimed to level the playing field. There is a question on why loss-making companies should be disallowed from making donations, especially since such a condition could put them at a disadvantage in competing for contracts. The instances of some companies being incorporated just before donating, or changing their names, suggest that some may have sought additional anonymity layers. But this doesn't necessarily indicate criminality.

Anjali Bhardwaj: The electoral bonds scheme was introduced after amending at least four laws, three of which the Court found unconstitutional. The scheme allowed even loss-making companies to donate, a shift from earlier norms where only profit-making companies could donate a capped percentage of their profits. Why

would loss-making companies make contributions? It has to be a quid pro quo.

The amendments facilitated the creation of shell companies to funnel anonymous donations to political parties. Critics, including the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the ECI, warned that this could lead to generation of black money and obscure political funding. Reducing the cash donation cap to 2,000 hardly curtailed the flow of undisclosed cash donations, as parties could still break down large amounts into smaller, untraceable contributions. The substantial income from electoral bonds reported by parties indicates that the scheme became a significant funding source, not necessarily reducing cash donations but by adding another layer of anonymity. Surprisingly, the data reveal few large corporates among the donors, raising questions about the use of shell companies for donations. The scheme's stated goals of reducing cash in politics and increasing funding transparency have not been met.

Subhash Chandra Garg: The concerns about shell companies and the potential for misuse of electoral bonds were addressed in consultations with the RBI. Adjustments were made to minimise risks, including setting a finite life for bonds to prevent them from being used as bearer bonds or for money laundering. The fear of shell companies being used extensively under the electoral bonds scheme is overstated. Direct donations from companies' accounts are logical and transparent, negating the need for shell companies. The scheme's design, focusing on anonymity, was intentional, and while the SBI's detailed data might have been released, it offers a chance to understand donation patterns without undermining the scheme's purpose. The SBI had asked for four months to match unique numbers but delivered them under a week after a rap from the Court. The Finance Ministry had claimed that the unique numbers were not recorded anywhere, but the latest disclosure shows that they were recorded. What do these contradicting statements show?

Subhash Chandra Garg: There is no contradiction. The scheme did not recognise the alphanumeric code as an identifier. It was a security feature, not supposed to exist for anyone, similar to how currency notes have multiple security features which are not publicly detailed. The government's statements saying there are no identifiers meant the alphanumeric codes were not meant for identification. In retrospect, using a number as a security feature might have been regrettable. A non-digitisable security method may have been more suitable. The SBI recorded this number confidentially, and since it was so securely handled, it remained unknown for a long time, which aligns with the scheme's intentions.

Anjali Bhardwaj: It is questionable that the SBI claimed it needed four more months to collate data, a task it later completed in just hours, suggesting an

attempt to misinform the Court and delay disclosing information. This delay sought was significant because it aimed to push the disclosure past the election date, undermining voters' right to information as emphasised by the Court's three-week deadline. Furthermore, if the alphanumeric code was solely a security feature and not meant for creating an audit trail, its recording on both the purchaser and depositor sides potentially compromises the electoral bonds scheme's integrity. This action by the SBI, a government bank, could have made sensitive information accessible to the ruling party, thus affecting the electoral process's fairness. Both issues warrant thorough investigation, and citizens have a right to understand the SBI's role in this context. *Vignesh Chandra Garg is former Finance and Economic Affairs Secretary, Government of India; Anjali Bhardwaj is a Right To Information activist and founder of Satark Nagrik Sangathan, a citizens' group working to promote transparency and accountability in government functioning*

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 16-3-2024

Amid farm stir, protesters live village life at Shambhu

Mohit Khanna

Patiala, As the echoes of tear gas canisters have faded and the absence of drones circling overhead signals a shift, the protesting farmers at the Shambhu border have moved beyond mere demonstrations.

They have embraced a spectrum of activities, including 'theekri pehra', group discussions and evening volleyball matches, transforming the protest site — an 8-km stretch along National Highway-44 near the border, dividing Haryana and Punjab — into a semblance of village life.

The 'pandal' at protest has taken the shape of 'pind di sath', a common place in villages where people gather for community discussions, political discourse and cultural gatherings. The tractor-trolleys with tarpaulin, fans and refrigerators have been converted into a home.

Tejveer Singh, leader of Kisan Mazdoor Morcha, shared insights into the farmers' activities with mediapersons. 'theekri pehras' were introduced following the February 18 incident when a truck carrying kerosene veered dangerously close to the area where protesting farmers were resting.

Amidst these activities, the protesting farmers engage in discussions on agricultural issues, drawing from the insights of experts.

"We are now planning to install a projector or mega-LED screen at the protest site. It will not merely be installed for entertainment, but will be used for showing views of farm experts for a clear understanding on MSP," said Tejveer Singh. He added that many farmers struggled while reading due to vision-related issues. So it was decided to make them understand the current

situation of the farming sector in the country through visuals.

Evenings are marked by friendly volleyball matches, promoting physical fitness among the farmers. Amidst political tensions over issues such as SYL Canal, a sense of camaraderie prevails at the border. Daily distributions of 8 quintals of milk by dairy farmers from Haryana foster solidarity among the protesters.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 16-3-2024

Farmers' protests a testimony to flawed market economy

A legalised MSP is the way forward not only for Indian farmers but also for growers across the globe. Markets will adjust accordingly.

Devinder Sharma

Food & Agriculture Specialist

THE world is witnessing an uprising by farmers in India and parts of Europe. Farmers in at least 65 countries have staged protests since January 2023. While the reasons behind the unprecedented wave of protests vary, the common thread is the failure of the unfettered market economy to sustain farming.

The words protesting farmers are using to vent their discontent may differ from one country/region to another, but the underlying message is the same: markets have failed to prop up farm incomes anywhere in the world. While in India, farmers want procurement at the minimum support price (MSP) as a legal right, European farmers are demanding the right value for their produce. The protests have also flagged the rising cost of production, cheaper imports and falling output prices in several countries in Europe, including Germany, France and Belgium, besides the potato price crash in Kenya and low vegetable prices in Nepal.

As farmers in Spain spilt 400,000 litres of milk on the streets, Malaysian growers protested against low paddy prices. In France, Confederation Paysanne, a prominent organisation of small farmers, at a recent meeting with President Macron, sought an assurance that no purchases would be allowed below a guaranteed agricultural price that included production cost plus remuneration for farmers and social protection.

Trade liberalisation, too, has come under attack. In Germany, France, Romania, Italy and Poland, farmers have staged protests against cheap imports coming from Ukraine, besides seeking a review of free trade agreements. They have blocked highways, stopped trucks carrying imported farm products and destroyed imported foodstuffs at many places. In France, thousands of farmers and fishermen have protested at ports against cheap fish imports, which they say are destroying farm livelihoods. In India, protesting farmers have reiterated their demand that India should pull out of the World Trade Organisation.

A compilation by Down to Earth magazine has shown that while 24 countries in Europe faced farmer protests, 12 in Africa, 11 in Asia, eight each in South America and North & Central America and two in Oceania have been shaken by farmer demonstrations in the past year. In Europe, a study on the latest round of protests in January-February 2024 by Euractiv, an independent pan-Europe media network, showed a strong demand for a fair and remunerative price for farmers, emanating mainly from France, Germany, Spain and Italy. Belgian farmers wanted protection in the food chain as well. Their anger was also directed at the strict environmental regulations that the European Commission is trying to impose in a bid to achieve net-zero emissions.

The impact of trade on the agricultural sector is a concern for EU farmers. German farmers' demonstrations were focused on the withdrawal of tax exemptions on fuel for agricultural vehicles (which Berlin agreed to phase out), environmental regulations — especially the Nitrate Directive — and the demand for incentives to make up for low prices. In essence, most of these protests across continents were primarily against poor crop prices, high cost of production, cheaper imports and withdrawal of incentives, besides local issues.

Leaving agriculture in the hands of markets hasn't helped the farm sector. The global outcry by farmers is a testimony to this. In any case, Indian agriculture has been a victim of a dominant economic thinking that has deliberately ensured that food prices are kept low so as to contain inflationary spirals. This is an outdated approach, and it's time the Reserve Bank of India revisited its macroeconomic policies to bring them in tune with the changing realities. The Household Expenditure Survey for 2022-23 shows that the expenditure on food has significantly declined, even as every household is burdened with an ever-rising expenditure on housing, health and education, which doesn't get adequately reflected in the consumption basket.

The moment you emphasise the urgency of a much-needed course correction, which will more or less free farm prices from tight macroeconomic control, a strong defiance emerges. It will lead to a higher inflation, and thereby market distortions, we are warned. This criticism is voiced whenever farmers reiterate the need for a guaranteed price. But the same economic thinking remained conspicuously quiet when a corporate rip-off resulted in inflation increasing by 57 per cent during the pandemic years and hovered around 53 per cent for the better part of 2023. Market distortions due to downright greed never sparked an outrage till economist Isabella M Weber from the University of Massachusetts cited 'seller's profit' as the reason, which even the US President acknowledged in his recent State of the Union address and promised to initiate remedial action.

Coming back to the call for fixing the minimum farm prices, what has not been realised is that for several decades, numerous incentives and domestic support mechanisms have been attempted to stabilise farm prices, but the reality is that farm distress has only worsened globally. Even in the US, from where the market reforms in agriculture have been borrowed, a documentary titled *Deja vu*, directed by former NASA scientist Bedabrata Pain, shows how the free market design pushed small farmers out of agriculture, leaving behind a trail of misery and devastation on the farm.

A free market, therefore, is not the solution. It is, in fact, the reason behind the continuing farm crisis. If only markets had the wisdom and could reward efficiency, there is no reason why farming would be a losing proposition. Farmers' revolt across the globe is a testimony to how flawed the economics has been. It's time to radically overhaul the economic design that has deliberately kept farming impoverished.

A legalised MSP is the way forward not only for Indian farmers but also for growers across the globe. Markets will adjust accordingly.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 22-3-2024

FIRST PHASE OF UPAZILA POLLS

Officials from EC, not admin, to be ROs, AROs

EC decision aimed at enhancing its capacity; election in 152 upazilas May 8 Mohiuddin Alamgir

The Election Commission has made its own officials the returning officers and assistant returning officers for the elections to 152 upazila parishads scheduled for May 8.

This is the first time the EC has asked its own workforce to conduct polls in so many places, EC officials said, adding that the tasks were usually shared by administration cadre officials.

For the May 8 elections, there are 59 returning officers (ROs), one for each district, and 152 assistant returning officers (AROs), one for each upazila.

Elections will be held in the rest 329 upazilas on May 23, May 29 and June 5.

District election officers or senior election officers are the ROs while upazila election officers are the AROs.

The commission has made the decision to develop the skills of its officials, according to Ashok Kumar Debnath, additional secretary of the EC.

A notice regarding the development was issued last night.

In the next phases of the upazila parishad election, either the administration officials or the EC officials will do the task. They will not share the responsibility, he told *The Daily Star* yesterday.

After a meeting of election commissioners, Ashok announced the schedule for the May 8 polls.

The last date for submission of nomination papers is April 15 and withdrawal of candidature is April 22, he said, adding that the nomination papers will be scrutinised on April 17.

Electronic voting machines will be used in 22 upazilas of Shariatpur, Chandpur, Jamalpur, Pabna, Sirajganj, Jashore, Pirojpur, Manikganj and Cox's Bazar.

This the sixth upazila parishad election in Bangladesh.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 30-3-2024

Many equations on AL's mind

Partha Pratim Bhattacharjee And

Ashik Abdullah Apu

Awami League's strategic decision to not use the party's electoral symbol for the upazila polls candidates is aimed at tackling multiple issues at one go.

On the one hand, the ruling party wants to entice the grassroots leaders of the opposition parties, including BNP, into the electoral race. On the other hand, it wants to allow new and popular second-tier AL leaders to contest the polls, scheduled to be held in phases from May 8.

Making the elections participatory and increasing the turnout are also in AL's mind, according to party insiders.

They said the ruling AL lawmakers are taking the election as an opportunity to tighten their grip on the party units in their constituencies by supporting the candidates loyal to them and working to ensure their smooth victories.

The AL leaders and former MPs, who were defeated by fellow party men in January 7 national polls, are also trying to oppose the candidates loyal to the incumbent lawmakers by fielding candidates of their choice to strengthen their position.

Many AL leaders, however, think the party's strategy will deepen internal feud at the grassroots and that the upazila polls would ultimately turn out to be a battle between "AL versus AL".

"The division in the party grassroots created centering the national polls would deepen further over the upazila elections. The situation has become so dire that local Awami League leaders are

socially mingling with the opposition party leaders instead of their party colleagues," a top AL leader from a southern district told The Daily Star wishing anonymity.

According to sources, the AL will neither interfere in the selection of candidates nor in the polls, but it will ensure that no aspirant is elected uncontested.

The ruling party also thinks if BNP formally boycotts the upazila elections, many of its grassroots leaders will run going against the party's decision, which would lead to a chaos in the party's grassroots. If BNP goes tough against those leaders, including expulsion, the party will lose its grip on its grassroots, AL leaders said.

The AL's strategy seems to have worked so far as a good number of leaders of the opposition parties participated in the recently held Cumilla city mayoral by-polls and municipality polls.

In Mymensingh's Trishal municipality, Aminul Islam, former joint convener of BNP's youth front Jubo Dal, became elected mayor, defeating the wife of local independent MP BM Anisuzzaman. Party sources said the upazila elections will help the AL recognise its popular and future leaders. But the AL high-command will not tolerate any violation of party discipline and any statement against the party and the government by the candidates.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, also the AL president, has already conveyed this message to the grassroots leaders who met her at the Gono Bhaban recently, according to insiders.

However, nepotism by incumbent MPs has already become evident in two recent elections as they picked candidates like a nomination board does.

For instance, the Cumilla City AL declared Tahseen Bahar as the party candidate for the March 9 mayoral by-polls to Cumilla City Corporation. Tahseen is the organising secretary of Cumilla City AL, while his father Bahauddin Bahar is the president of the same unit and also the local MP. Local AL leader Nurur Rahman Mahmud also contested the election throwing a challenge to his fellow party colleague. Speaking to The Daily Star, AL Joint General Secretary AFM Bahauddin Nasim recently said, "People will vote for the candidates of their choice. It won't matter who would field whom or whether a candidate is the favorite of an individual. It's not important who has picked an aspirant and how. Voters will decide who will be elected."

He also said there is no problem if the voters and the AL activists jointly extend their support to a particular candidate. "We will appreciate that. We welcome the candidates who are popular among the voters," he added.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 30-3-2024

BNP remains split over joining polls

Mohammad Al-Masum Molla

Although the BNP has decided not to join the upcoming upazila polls as a political party, many party leaders are in favour of allowing its leaders and activists to contest the elections as independent candidates.

The party may allow individuals to run for the race as it would help boost the party's grassroots morale and speed up the organisational activities, said party insiders.

"We will not join the polls as a party, but many of us believe that grassroots leaders should be allowed to take part in the elections. As the polls will be held at the local level, BNP's presence is very important for its

future protest programmes,” said a standing committee member, wishing not to be named.

The BNP has been staying away from all polls since 2019 and the party expelled its leaders who contested elections going against the party’s decision. The party even boycotted the January 7 election, stating that a free and fair election is not possible under the incumbent government.

A senior leader of the party said they will try to convince the party activists not to participate in the polls, but if anyone joins, they will not be expelled.

He added that to hold the public support at the local level, the party should go soft on those who will stand for elections.

The Awami League already decided that it would not permit its leaders to use its electoral symbol -- “boat” -- in the upazila elections.

BNP leaders said there was no scope of joining the polls as a political party as it would give the ruling AL a weapon to say that the BNP has made a blunder by boycotting the January 7 polls.

They said the AL has taken the strategy of not giving nomination to any candidate for two considerations. One is to bring the BNP into the election, thereby allowing the AL to say that the BNP made a wrong decision by boycotting the national polls. The other consideration is that the BNP candidates participating in the polls may end up winning in only a few upazilas, but not being successful in most, which would give the ruling party a chance to show that BNP’s popularity no longer exists.

The issue of the upazila election was discussed in the BNP’s last standing committee meeting on Sunday where leaders gave different opinions.

One group said the party should not take part in the polls and should not allow its leaders to contest the elections as independents.

Those leaders said if the party boycotts the election, it will lose its festive atmosphere and it would be an intra-party election as the contenders will be only from the ruling party.

The other group said the party should not join the polls, but if any leaders take part as independents, they should not be barred.

They added that turnout in the local government elections is always high as upazila chairman and vice-chairman candidates usually maintain regular contacts with locals.

Besides, people also consider many local issues in the local government polls and for this, the BNP will find it difficult to keep people away from casting votes, they opined.

The first phase of the upazila polls will be conducted on May 8.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 23-3-2024

BNP wants to destabilise market

Quader on Rizvi’s solidarity with ‘Boycott India’

Staff Correspondent

BNP is hatching a conspiracy to destabilise the country’s overall market management system in the name of boycotting Indian products, Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader claimed yesterday.

“The incident of a BNP leader throwing away his shawl and boycotting Indian products is nothing but madness. A major part of our daily essentials come from India. A leader of BNP wants India’s help in salvaging democracy, while another leader calls for a boycott of Indian products,” said Quader.

He was addressing a press conference held at the Party President Sheikh Hasina’s Dhanmondi political office in the capital.

Throwing his Indian shawl away in front of the BNP Nayapaltan central office on Wednesday, the party’s Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi called for the boycott of Indian products.

“It is an outcome of BNP’s mental BNP disorder to destroy the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India. The people of our country will not pay heed,” said the AL General Secretary.

People will boycott those who came up with the call for boycotting Indian products, he added.

“Bangladesh is surrounded by India due to its geographical location, and a significant portion of our daily essentials are sourced from India. Furthermore, we have many advantages, such as the ability to import Indian goods at a lower cost,” he said.

BNP is now politically bankrupt and thus its leaders are making derogatory remarks to destroy relations with a friendly neighbour, he said.

“Twenty-one years of hostile relations with India after the assassination of Bangabandhu have harmed us more. All problems can be resolved if the relationship is good. Some issues like Teesta, Feni river are still not resolved... but there is positive progress,” said Quader.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 29-3-2024

80pc BNP activists faced torture in jail

Says Fakhurul

UNB, Dhaka

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhurul Islam Alamgir yesterday said 80 percent of BNP leaders and activists

faced torture unleashed by the “fascist” Awami League government.

“They can’t retain power without unleashing torture and suppressing people. Their first victim of suppression is BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and she is fighting for her life,” he said.

Fakhrul said these at an Eid gifts distribution programme among families of the victims of enforced disappearances on behalf of BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman, organised by Aamra BNP Paribar (We are BNP Family) held at BNP chairperson’s Gulshan office.

He said when BNP started the movement against the fascist government, aiming to establish people’s right and democracy, they started repression on the BNP men. “They have created such an environment of fear where no one can talk or write freely.”

The fascist regime’s repression reached such a level that the opposition leaders and activists’ family member including father, mother, son, daughter, and wife were not spared.

After getting bail, the victims shared the experience of inhuman torture in prison such as their nails being uprooted, breaking their legs, and so on. They said they were not even provided any treatment, he added.

Urging unity of all forces, BNP secretary general said, “As a democratic political party, we are doing more than our capacity to free the country from this horrible situation.” There is no alternative to forge unity like 1969, 1971, 1990 where people fought against the fascist, autocrat regime to restore democracy, he said.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 31-3-2024

Hefazat seeks to spread its network down to village

Partha Pratim Bhattacharjee

Hefazat-e Islam will form committees in every village, union, upazila and district to protect Islamic values.

Hefazat is calling the committees “non-madrassa committees” and the process of forming them would begin after Eid.

Senior leaders of Hefazat decided these during a meeting on Friday at Jamia Madania Baridhara madrassa. Hefazat Senior Naib-E-Amir Mufti Khalil Ahmad Qasemi, also chief Mufti of the Darul Uloom Hathazari, chaired the meeting.

At the moment, Hefazat has committees in Qawmi madrasas, and according to the then education minister, there were 19,199 Qawmi madrasas in 2022.

At the meeting, Hefazat leaders discussed the issue of having its arrested leaders and activists released. Meeting participants said that the government assured them of releasing the arrestees time and again but did not keep its word.

The meeting decided to wage a strong movement after Eid demanding the release of all its arrested activists and leaders, including Hefazat Joint General Secretary Mamunul Haque, and the withdrawal of cases against them.

Asked about the meeting decisions, Hefazat Joint General Secretary Azizul Haque Islamabadi told The Daily Star, “Our grassroots leaders are frustrated and we have decided this [going for movement] under their pressure,” he added.

The Qawmi madrasa-based organisation also decided to support the boycott Indian product movement. It, however, will not take part in any agitation over the matter but will conduct social-media campaigns and distribute leaflets to urge people to boycott Indian products.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 20-3-2024

Cabinet approves hybrid system for Parliamentary elections

160 MPs to be elected from seats, 65 under PR system

Proposal to come as draft constitutional amendment

Ishara Mudugamuwa

The Cabinet of Ministers has approved the proposal forwarded by Justice Minister Dr. Wijayadasa Rajapakse to draft a constitutional amendment concerning Sri Lanka’s electoral system for Parliamentary elections, Government Information Department said.

As per the proposed constitutional amendment, 160 of 225 MPs in Parliament are to be elected by the electoral level and the remaining 65 MPs would be selected under Proportional System, either at the national or provincial level.

A Cabinet sub-committee headed by Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena was appointed to make recommendations to draft a constitutional amendment concerning Sri Lanka’s electoral system after consultations with party leaders and other stakeholders and those recommendations had received a majority consensus.

Accordingly, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the proposal forwarded by the Justice Minister to draft the necessary laws for the proposed Constitutional Amendment.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 21-3-2024

Upcoming polls: Parties mull different strategies

Lakdev Liyanagama

The most repeated political question these days is whether President Ranil Wickremesinghe will let events play out as they would according to the Constitution for a Presidential Election (PE) to be held in mid-September or mid-October or whether he will call for a General Election (GE) ahead of schedule.

This question was further fuelled last week by an interview given to a private television network by former Finance Minister and founder of the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), Basil Rajapaksa who had arrived in the country on March 5, after vacationing in the United States.

Basil Rajapaksa's comments

It was known that Rajapaksa, along with former President Mahinda Rajapaksa had met with President Wickremesinghe and that matters of political interest were discussed but the details of the dialogue were not known. Former Minister Rajapaksa's comments however shed light on the SLPP's thinking.

Basil Rajapaksa's stance was quite unequivocal. He stated that the SLPP preferred for the GE to be conducted first, instead of a PE. It was the first public indication that the SLPP as a party would be requesting that a GE be held before the PE.

Rajapaksa gave his rationale for this. If the PE was held first and a candidate of a particular political party emerged victorious even with the slimmest of margins, the effect of this victory would result in an unfair advantage to that party at a subsequent GE, he said.

Rajapaksa alluded to the victory recorded by the SLPP's Presidential candidate Gotabaya Rajapaksa at the 2019 November PE which was then magnified at the GE held nine months later in August 2020 where the party won almost a two-thirds majority, securing 145 seats.

Although this was victory recorded by the party he founded, Rajapaksa went on to say that this does not reflect the true will of the people and that, in hindsight, he felt this would be detrimental to the country. As such, he would now wish for the GE to be conducted first, he argued.

However, Rajapaksa's observations about even the narrowest of victories translating into massive mandates at a subsequent GE have been proved only twice. On both occasions the Presidents in office were his brothers: Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2010 and Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2020.

In January 2010, basking in the afterglow of the war victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Mahinda Rajapaksa won the PE with 57 per cent of the vote. At the GE that followed in April, the United Peoples' Freedom Alliance (UPFA) he led won 144 seats.

GE mandate

In other instances when a GE followed a PE, there has been no overwhelming mandate for the party victorious at the PE. For instance, in 1989, the United National Party (UNP) led by President Ranasinghe Premadasa won only 125 Seats at the GE.

Similarly, in the GE held in 2000 which followed the re-election of President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga in 1999, her Peoples' Alliance (PA) won 107 Seats, six seats short of even a simple majority in Parliament which made governing difficult for President Kumaratunga during her entire term of office.

That was also the pattern when Maithripala Sirisena secured the Presidency in January 2015. In the GE that followed, the ruling United National Front (UNF) secured 107 Seats, again six seats short of a simple majority, a factor that played a role in the tumultuous events that followed.

It is evident that what matters is not who the winner is at the PE but the margin of victory. Mahinda Rajapaksa recorded 58 per cent of the vote in 2010. Gotabaya Rajapaksa achieved 52 per cent of the vote in 2020. Both of these victories translated into big wins at the GE.

In PE wins that did not convert to massive victories at the subsequent GE, the winner at the PE recorded lesser margins of victory: 50.4 per cent by President Premadasa in 1989, 51.1 per cent by President Kumaratunga in 1999 and 51.2 per cent by President Sirisena in 2015.

Basil Rajapaksa then went on to reflect on what he believes would be the best political option for the country. Ideally, this would be a Government formed incorporating the SLPP, the United National Party (UNP) led by President Wickremesinghe and the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) led by Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa, he said:

The reasoning behind this thinking, Rajapaksa said is because the SLPP had both a well-established grassroots network and a vote base, the SJB also had a vote base while the UNP had, in President Wickremesinghe, a leader capable of guiding the country out of its present economic predicament.

Basil Rajapaksa's comments have been interpreted by different observers in varied ways. Some say that by making such comments publicly, he is attempting to persuade President Wickremesinghe to follow his line

of thinking. Others say it is an attempt to prevent the divisions within the SLPP from aggravating.

There are two processes by which Basil Rajapaksa's call for an early GE can eventuate. Firstly, President Wickremesinghe has the Constitutional authority to dissolve Parliament any time now. Secondly, the SLPP which has a majority in Parliament can pass a resolution to dissolve Parliament.

Parliament dissolution

The first requires President Wickremesinghe to agree with Basil Rajapaksa's way of thinking. The second is also not free of obstacles: many SLPP Parliamentarians, especially those elected for the first time, will balk at the prospect of dissolving Parliament early as it will cost them their pensions and perhaps the duty free car permits.

It will be recalled that, when President Wickremesinghe contested Dullas Alahapperuma in the Parliamentary contest to choose a President after Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resignation in July 22, 2022, one of the assurances he gave SLPP Parliamentarians was that he would not dissolve Parliament unduly early.

Many believe President Wickremesinghe is unlikely to deviate from that position for political expediency. They also note that, in the only instance when a GE was held first which was in 1994 under President D.B. Wijetunga, it resulted in a defeat for the then ruling party, the UNP.

In that instance, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga first led the newly formed PA to victory at the GE winning 105 Seats. Kumaratunga then went on to record the highest percentage at a PE in November 1994, polling an overwhelming 62 per cent of the vote.

President Wickremesinghe's thinking on this issue has not been publicly declared yet. However, the General Secretary of his party Palitha Range Bandara has refuted the idea of conducting a GE early. Whether Bandara's comments reflect the President's thinking is a matter of conjecture.

Bandara said the PE should be conducted on a day between September 16 and October 16 this year as stipulated by the Constitution. "We have to conduct the PE first. We should honour the Constitution by acting with discipline and transparency," Bandara said.

Creating a political environment which encourages crossovers to remain in power all the time could lead to civil unrest, Bandara cautioned. The General Secretary said the UNP also expects the GE to be held on schedule. That poll is not due until August 2025, Bandara noted.

Rising popularity

Many perceive the strategy of conducting the GE first, promoted by the SLPP, as a move to stifle the rising popularity of the Jathika Jana Balavegaya (JJB or the National People's Power). The campaign of that party has been primarily aimed at projecting its leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD) as its Presidential candidate.

The JJB has been holding a series of well-coordinated rallies that have attracted considerable crowd support and have maintained a strong presence on social media as well, creating the perception that there is a wave of support for the party, to the point where some observers feel they could be frontrunners.

This is however predicated on the premise that the next election will be a PE with its winner-takes-it-all outcome, where there are no rewards for polling less votes and finishing second. The JJB's rival parties feel that its performance will not be as robust at a GE.

The JJB's opponents feel that if a GE is held first, there will be a more level playing field. That is because all parties will acquire some representation according to the proportion of the votes they polled. It has also been noted that the JJB is not as strong in electoral level politics.

This debate about which election to hold first – PE or GE – will linger on as the most pressing political issue at least over the next few weeks. The ultimate decision will be in the hands of President Ranil Wickremesinghe who is yet to reveal his thinking on the issue.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 31-3-2024

SLPP says no deviation from Presidential polls timeline

By Chamikara Weerasinghe

Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) MP Sanjeeva Edirimanna yesterday said that President Ranil Wickremesinghe's stance on a Presidential Election and his candidature could coincide with the SLPP's perspective and current deliberations on holding elections.

Edirimanna said that the timing of the candidate's announcement is crucial for a successful election campaign, and as such, the SLPP's nominee will only be disclosed at the opportune time to initiate a strong and compelling campaign.

Edirimanna said this in response to our question about whether the SLPP would prefer to hold a Presidential or General Election first.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe had recently told a group of Ministers, State Ministers and some parliamentarians in the Government that they could not jeopardise the International Monetary Fund (IMF) program by holding elections early.

Since the IMF program is projected to conclude by the end of July, President Wickremesinghe had said that he was not in a position to hold any elections before August. He said that by law the Elections Commission is empowered to declare a Presidential Election at any time after July. Therefore, the President had said, “The Presidential Election will be held first and all other elections can follow.”

Edirimanna said that some political parties have been trying to project a negative image of the SLPP for not revealing their Presidential candidate yet. However, it is a common practice for political parties to announce their candidates a mere three to four months before the election campaign begins. He said that before the last Presidential Election on November 17, 2019, they were repeatedly asked about their candidate, but they did not announce it until August 15. Similarly, the United National Party (UNP) declared its candidate on November 21, 2014, before the election on January 8, 2015.

Declaring a candidate just before the election campaign is a standard practice and not something unusual or strange, as some political parties are trying to portray, Edirimanne said.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU, 25-3-2024

INTERVIEW

New forces grew from the seeds of alternative politics we sowed

We can't rule out the possibility of party unity with new forces. We shouldn't be rigid.

Once visible, vocal and different from traditional political forces, the Bibeksheel movement is now almost nowhere in national political scenarios. One of the key members involved in the movement was **Ranju Darshana**, who stole limelight after securing over 23,400 votes in the race for the Kathmandu mayoral seats in 2017, when she was just 21 years old. Now she is the general secretary of the Bibeksheel Sajha Party, which is led by Samikchya Baskota. Post's **Thira Lal Bhusal** asks Ranju Darshana what went wrong, why they didn't succeed in reviving the movement, and if they have any new strategy to rejuvenate the organisation.

Bibeksheel Sajha Party is now almost invisible in Nepal's political as well as social movements. What is it doing now?

The Bibeksheel Sajha Party is striving to reemerge in Nepali politics. The then Bibeksheel Nepali Party and Sajha Party united to form Bibeksheel Sajha Party in 2017. Some prominent personalities who were established in their respective sectors and a group of youths like us who groomed ourselves on the ground of social movements got united. We had expected that the synergy would give wonderful results. Unfortunately, it couldn't happen. The unity couldn't last long. It was the same point, people were disappointed first about our movement. Because many were expecting something different from a new group like us. We got confused too because most of us had no political background. In fact, we were politically naive. I don't want to blame anyone for this. I would rather ponder within ourselves about what went wrong.

Ujwal dai [Ujwal Thapa] was the key figure to lead the movement in the initial stage. He had high standards on moral, integral and ethical aspects. He wouldn't compromise on these core beliefs. But he also had no political background. We collectively decided to split the party. But it was widely criticised and many well-wishers wanted the two newly emerged forces to come together. We got reunified. But, again, we split. So, a series of unity and divisions embroiled us so badly that we couldn't give time to the public. We were so much engaged in intra-party bickering that we couldn't work on the pledges we made to the people. When we had to fight the November 2022 general elections, our party was in shambles. Some of us had to fight elections independently. Some of our friends fought under other parties' election symbols, while others joined new parties.

Traditional politicians used to claim that the Bibeksheel Nepali Party wouldn't sustain as it lacked an ideology and an orientation needed to thrive as a political organisation. You just mentioned that political naivety also caused the problem.

The political culture they were referring to was the tendency of getting unified in an organisation and embracing a strategy to reach power in whatever way possible. As far as the issue of political ideology is concerned, we were advocating that we wanted to establish a centrist force—not a leftist nor a rightist. We championed kalyankari loktantra (welfare democracy). We stood for constitutionalism. The same tenets are now discussed as political features. So, maybe we couldn't properly convince the people at the time. We wanted to present ourselves an alternative to traditional politics, but we couldn't do so effectively due to intra-party wranglings.

If the infighting was to blame, why the remaining team couldn't revive the party after Rabindra Mishra and his team left the organisation?

By that time, the organisation had already been in deep trouble. He was a party chair, but suddenly, he came up with a political idea that he described as 'country above an ideology'. He abruptly tried to change the party's political line. We came up with another political document to counter his idea. When we opposed it, he sacked us from the party. Now, we are gradually fixing the internal things and trying to give momentum.

Is it also because of Ujwal Thapa's sudden death that you all are facing a situation like a leadership void?

His sudden demise has certainly caused a huge setback not only for youths like us but also for the entire movement of alternative politics. He, however, had already voluntarily sidelined himself from active politics. However, we were constantly in touch with him for his mentorship, and he guided us on important issues. He had already transferred the leadership to other leaders. So, we can't have that excuse. We have to improve ourselves in many practical aspects.

When you two leaders, Samikchya Baskota as a chairperson and you as a general secretary, took the helm, it was widely welcomed, and people had high hopes. However, even after a year under the new leadership, we don't find the party working as per that expectation.

Your observation is not wrong. This is my first time working closely with Samikchya Ji. Though we were at the same party for some time, we had no chance to collaborate. We are now trying to fix internal things gradually. The major challenge was to instil confidence in the friends as they were demotivated by the ups and downs they faced in the party within a few years. They were worried that a decade-long struggle wasn't yielding any result. We are trying to convince them by saying that despite our failure to solidify our organisation, the country has seen alternative forces because of the seeds we sowed. It was the path that we created. We are now doing some planning and preparation, and we can show something in a year.

What are the new plans and agenda?

One of our focuses will be women in politics. We will try to work on the political rights of women and challenges in politics. We also want to create a mark on how an organisation led by women is efficiently run and can be different in its structures.

What type of composition in the party leadership have you created from gender perspectives after you two took the helm? Is your party significantly different from traditional ones?

Besides us, one vice-chair and a secretary are women. This is made mandatory by the party statute. Still, I can't claim that our party completely differs from traditional ones. Therefore, we are planning some women-focused programmes and launching them in the next couple of months.

Do you think your pair can inspire young women?

First we have to turn our party into a vibrant organisation and show an inspiring graph of results until the next general convention. Once we can do it, they will follow us, otherwise they will not. So, we have to focus on our work.

How different is a pair of women leaders leading a party? Or gender doesn't matter when it comes to leading an organisation?

It definitely matters. We are more empathetic to each other and to our team members. Our approach is that we first have to understand the members' views before we make a decision. It's not that we don't have any differences. We do have differences on work styles and other things but we are very conscious that our differences shouldn't affect the organisation because we know how leaders' differences weakened the party in the past.

Is the difference between you and Baskota an ideological one?

We don't have ideological differences. I had already become active as an independent and I wouldn't have rejoined the organisation from the convention if there was an ideological difference. Our party statute is clear and follows the ideas adopted in the country's constitution. The party convention may change something through due process, that's a different aspect. But now we follow the statute and the constitution. We both agree on the same.

Many wonder why the young Ranju Darshana of 2017 gradually disappeared.

I think I haven't disappeared. But it is true that we as a team failed to cash in on the votes and popularity that we gained at the time. We got lost in a series of disputes over party unity and divisions multiple times. Besides that, I was just studying for my Bachelor's degree. Afterward, I completed graduation and also the master's degree as well. The unnecessary and prolonged disputes not only crippled the party but also killed our time. So, we couldn't work for the public. Therefore, I also tried to avoid the media because I myself wasn't quite satisfied. I rather tried to understand issues in depth and make personal growth.

New political forces have emerged very strongly. In this context, how can you regain your space?

I take their emergence positively. People know about our contribution in spreading positivity and something new in our society. In the past, we focused more on campaigns. Now we want to offer a solution as well. For instance, our party statute says Nepal needs a directly-elected head of the government for better delivery. Likewise, the lawmaker shouldn't become ministers. It stops frequent making and breaking of coalitions and ensures one level of political stability.

Is there any possibility of your party going for unity with other new forces?

Party unity isn't something that I can say anything on a personal basis. It has to be decided by the party. It depends on how things develop over time. If we get an official proposal, we should take it positively and hold talks. We shouldn't rule out such possibility and be rigid against it.

Does your party have any policy differences with the Rastriya Swatantra Party? For instance, the RSP doesn't want the provinces in the present form? What is your party's view?

We are yet to hold a policy convention and make decisions on such specific issues. We will do it in future for more clarity. As of now, we are committed to democratic values and the three-tier federal system. They have expressed their reservation over provincial structure. But at the same time they are also forming the party's provincial committees. So, there is some contradiction there. In other things, there are no significant differences.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 18-3-2024

Iranians' involvement in elections thwarts nation's adversaries: MP

TEHRAN – A member of Iranian Parliament has asserted that the nation has disheartened adversaries by actively participating in the recent elections.

Farhad Bashiri, a representative from Pakdasht, emphasized the responsibility of both the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the administration to address citizens' concerns, particularly focusing on economic matters.

He highlighted the consistent and extensive involvement of the people in various spheres, including rallies and elections. He emphasized the pivotal role of citizen engagement in shaping the nation's destiny, noting its positive impact across security, social, cultural, and political domains.

Bashiri also pointed out the nefarious attempts by certain groups to dissuade people from voting, despite

their failure in the face of widespread public participation.

He underscored the urgent need for officials to address citizens' grievances and formulate a comprehensive economic strategy to strengthen the national currency. Bashiri urged both the parliament and the administration to take decisive actions to underscore the importance of citizen participation in the electoral process.

MP highlights officials' greater responsibility amid high voter turnout

Another parliament member, Ali Babaei, underscored the invaluable asset of Iran's well-educated populace. He emphasized that officials now face an augmented duty with the upsurge in voter engagement, urging them to inspire hope within society.

He observed, "The public has unequivocally rejected any efforts to suppress voter turnout or impede participation in the elections."

He further stated, "The people have consistently been the bedrock of our nation, readily responding to the call of the Leader of Islamic Revolution. Their robust involvement in the electoral process reaffirms this. Hence, it is imperative for officials to recognize and appreciate the people's role, acknowledging that the presence of an educated and respected populace is Iran's greatest asset."

The Iranian lawmaker highlighted, "The electorate has exhibited heightened enthusiasm during this election cycle." He added, "Given these circumstances, it is our responsibility as officials to foster optimism across the nation. We must prioritize addressing people's concerns and rectifying any shortcomings to alleviate public dissatisfaction."

Iran's Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi revealed that the turnout for the March 1 parliamentary elections stood at 41%, with approximately 25 million individuals participating, including a 5% count of blank votes. He also announced that the second round of elections is scheduled to take place in early spring.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 17-3-2024

Cracks within?

The way forward should be for the PTI leadership to make a proper strategy on how to deal with the current situation

Not all seems to be well in the House of the PTI, with reports of rifts within the party after the reserved seats fiasco. First it was Sher Afzal Marwat who admitted during a show on Geo News that the PTI had made a mistake by joining hands with the Sunni Ittehad Council

(SIC) instead of the JUI-Sherani group or the Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM). Then senior PTI leader Barrister Ali Zafar gave a statement agreeing with Marwat and saying that, on the directive of Imran Khan, the PTI decided to join the MWM, but the decision was changed the next day when ‘some people’ who met Imran Khan in Adiala jail came out and said the party would be going with the SIC. Zafar said that when he asked Imran Khan about this, the PTI founder said he had not changed his decision. Interestingly, on Friday SIC Chairman Sahibzada Hamid Raza warned the PTI not to wash their dirty laundry in public, saying he had a lot to reveal but had chosen not to share because of his commitment to Imran Khan’s cause. The SIC chief took a strong exception to Marwat’s comments and advised the PTI to put its house in order. He added that PTI members should not create divisions on someone’s instructions, clarifying that he had not requested the alliance and the decision to join the SIC was taken by Imran Khan.

There had been rumours and apprehensions that ever since PTI founder Imran Khan’s incarceration, too many groups within groups have mushroomed within his party. To the less partisan observer, it seems each group is angling for a specific agenda and interest rather than the party’s well-being. Media reports indicate that these groupings existed before within the political class of the PTI but have become more visible and pronounced after the party became populated with more and more lawyers. There has also been a lot of criticism on how the party’s legal teams are handling – or mishandling – different cases. And a lot of this cannot be discounted as mere speculations since statements by one party leader against the other have now become a norm in the PTI.

This sort of internal friction can hardly help an already besieged PTI. The way forward should be for the PTI leadership to make a proper strategy on how to deal with the current situation. Of course, it does not help when PTI leaders like Shahbaz Gill are seen holding demonstrations outside the International Monetary Fund (IMF) headquarters in Washington just when the government is engaging with the global lender over the release of the final tranche of the \$3 billion Standby Arrangement (SBA). At the demonstration, PTI workers and leaders alleged that their party’s National Assembly seats were “reduced” to 90 from 180 in the general elections. Observers say that instead of alienating the state and the government, it is time the PTI engaged with all political stakeholders so that room can be made for Imran Khan’s eventual release. Many have appreciated that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur met Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif

to discuss provincial matters with the federal government as this is how democracies work – by engaging with each other rather than viewing those across the aisle as mortal enemies. It is time for the entirety of Pakistan’s political class to grow up. Petulant politics should be left behind in school playgrounds. Parliament is not the place for this.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 20-3-2024

Leader says PTI lost reserved seats by not joining hands with PTIP

Qazi Mohammad Anwar had pleaded the case of SIC in the PHC and was joined later by other senior lawyers

By Bureau report

PESHAWAR: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) spokesman Moazzam Butt on Tuesday blamed a senior leader, Qazi Muhammad Anwar, for the party failure in securing seats reserved for women and minorities.

The Peshawar High Court (PHC) recently upheld the Election Commission of Pakistan decision of denying the reserved seats to Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), which was later joined by the independently elected and PTI supported lawmakers. The ECP instead allotted these seats to different political parties in proportion to their presence in the parliament.

Qazi Mohammad Anwar had pleaded the case of SIC in the PHC and was joined later by other senior lawyers.

Moazzam Butt Advocate was a member of the committee set up by the PTI leadership to have talks with PTI Parliamentarians. Talking to Geo News, he said the PTI would have obtained the reserved seats had there not been a haste on the part of some party leaders.

Without naming names, Moazzam Butt said talks were held with PTIP and these were progressing in the right direction. "Assad Qaiser, Ali Amin Gandapur and Habib Orakzai met the PTIP leaders. They had agreed to give chairman and vice-chairman slots to the PTI. Pervez Khattak quit the office. It was agreed that PTI will have majority in the executive committee as well," he explained.

Moazzam Butt said senior party leaders Hamid Khan and Shadab Jaffery were consulted and there were headways but things changed when the PTI decided to join the SIC. He said the PTI would have achieved the reserved seats had the leadership not taken a hasty decision of joining SIC which had no parliamentary presence.

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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 27-3-2024

S&P Ratings raises India's growth forecast to 6.8% for next fiscal

New Delhi, S&P Global Ratings on Tuesday raised India's growth forecast for the next financial year to 6.8 per cent, but flagged restrictive interest rates as a dampener for economic growth.

The Indian economy is estimated to have clocked a growth of 7.6 per cent in the current fiscal. In November, last year, the US-based agency had projected India's growth to be 6.4 per cent in 2024-25 fiscal on robust domestic momentum. "For Asian emerging market economies, we generally project robust growth, with India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam in the lead," S&P said in its Economic Outlook for the Asia Pacific.

In largely domestic demand-led economies such as India, Japan, and Australia, the impact of higher interest rates and inflation on household spending power reduced sequential GDP growth in the second half, S&P said.

"We expect India's real GDP growth to moderate to 6.8 per cent in fiscal year 2025 (ending March 2025)," S&P said. Restrictive interest rates are likely to weigh on demand next fiscal year, while regulatory actions to tame unsecured lending will affect credit growth. A lower fiscal deficit will also dampen growth, it added.

"Even as we expect a mild slowdown in Asian EM economies, we generally see solid domestic demand growth and a pick-up in exports to drive robust growth, with India, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam in the lead," S&P said. It said high real policy rates will choke demand and are therefore likely to strengthen the case for lowering rates. — **PTI**

Praises RBI for taking strict steps

S&P Global Ratings on Tuesday said the RBI was showing serious commitment to improving governance and transparency in the sector

The recent measures by the RBI will curtail lenders' over-exuberance, enhance compliance culture, and safeguard customers, but the drawback will be higher capital costs for institutions

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 29-3-2024

Is India's growth rate overestimated?

Rajeswari Sengupta

Official data shows that the Indian economy has been growing at 7-8 per cent in recent times. While economic activity seems to have recovered strongly after the pandemic, the actual improvement is uncertain because there are measurement issues. One important issue lies with the GDP deflator. Several experts wrote about this problem after the release of the 2011-12 base year series of national accounts. It's time to revisit this issue.

According to the latest figures, nominal GDP increased by 10.1 per cent in the third quarter of 2023-24

(October-December). This translated into a real growth of 8.4 per cent, implying that the deflator was 1.7 per cent. Could India's inflation be so low? We know this is not plausible. So what is going on?

It may help to start with a disclaimer. The statistical problems are quite technical, and get very complex, very quickly. Any brief explanation will therefore need to generalise and sweep away this complexity, so that the outlines of the problem can be perceived clearly. With that caveat, let's proceed.

In the old GDP measurement methodology, estimates of real GDP relied heavily on volume-based indices such as the index of industrial production. Real growth (for the most part) was calculated directly, and a deflator was then applied to produce a nominal growth figure. Hence, problems in the deflator did not really matter for real growth rate.

Under a new methodology adopted in 2015, GDP is measured in nominal terms, which is then deflated by price indices to derive the real numbers. The deflator has therefore become crucial. If the deflator underestimates actual inflation, then real growth will be overstated. This is what has been happening for the last year.

There are two separate problems with India's GDP deflator.

First, the National Statistics Office (NSO) does not use the international standard measure of output prices — the producer price index — to deflate GDP. This is because India does not have a PPI. The NSO proxies the PPI with the wholesale price index (WPI). However, the WPI does not track producer prices very well. It is, in fact, heavily skewed towards commodities such as oil and steel which are essential inputs in commodity importing countries like India. Also, the WPI does not measure the price of services, and services constitute two-thirds of the economy.

This skew in the composition of WPI means that whenever commodity prices fall steeply, the WPI will decline, even if producer prices are still rising. This has been a major issue recently. Since September 2022, consumer price index (CPI) inflation has been above 5 per cent, as producers kept increasing prices, but WPI inflation has steadily declined, because global commodity prices have fallen. During April-December, 2023, WPI inflation averaged -1.0 per cent. This persistent fall in WPI inflation artificially inflated real GDP during 2023-24.

Second, most G20 countries calculate real gross value added (GVA) in the manufacturing sector using a methodology known as double deflation. In this method, nominal outputs are deflated using an output deflator, while inputs are deflated using a separate input deflator. Then the real inputs are subtracted from real outputs to derive real GVA. India, by contrast, deflates nominal numbers using a single deflator.

Why does this matter? It matters because if input prices diverge from output prices, single deflation can misstate growth by a big margin.

Consider what has been happening recently. When the price of inputs falls and price of output increases, profits increase and nominal value added goes up (it helps to think of GVA as profits, which go up when input prices fall). Since real GDP is supposed to be measured at “constant prices”, this increase needs to be deflated away. Double deflation will do this easily. But single deflation using an input price index like WPI will amplify the nominal increase. So, if the nominal increase in GVA is 10 per cent as the result of rising profits, while WPI falls by 1 per cent, the real increase will be calculated as 11 per cent, even if real output has not changed at all.

Can anything be done to quickly resolve this problem?

There is an interim solution that can be easily applied. The NSO can start using the CPI series to deflate nominal value added. The CPI is closer to producer prices than the WPI.

It is interesting to consider what would happen if CPI is used as a deflator for manufacturing GDP computation for 2023-24. Official numbers show that for the first three quarters, nominal growth rates in this sector were 2.2, 12.0, and 10.6 per cent respectively, while real growth rates were 5.0, 14.4 and 11.6 per cent. CPI inflation (excluding food, fuel and house rent) for these three quarters were 5.9, 5.1 and 4.4 per cent. If the correct deflator had been in line with this CPI inflation, then real manufacturing growth rates would instead have been -3.7, 6.9 and 6.2 per cent for the three quarters.

The change to CPI makes even more sense in the services sector. CPI has extensive information on price movements in various services sub-sectors. It would make a big difference to the estimated 2023-24 growth figures in trade/transport/communication and financial services, bringing down their growth rates by around 6 and 4 percentage points respectively.

In summary, whenever there is a collapse of global commodity prices that pushes the WPI-based deflator far below the CPI, the real GDP growth rate of India is likely to be overestimated. Similarly, as the gap between input and output inflation starts to close, the problem will diminish. But that could also send a misleading signal, because it might seem that growth is slowing, when only the measurement bias is disappearing.

The CPI-WPI differential gives a rough indication of the degree to which the real GDP numbers might be distorted. Given how important the GDP data is, it is imperative that the NSO develops producer price indices and applies the double deflation methodology to avoid these distortions.

The writer is Associate Professor of Economics, IGIDR

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 21-3-2024

Express View on inflation report:

Managing growth

The GDP growth estimates released by the National Statistical Office at the end of February had shown that the Indian economy grew at 8.4 per cent in the third quarter, surpassing the most optimistic projections. They implied that the economy had grown at an average of 8.2 per cent in the first three quarters (April-December) of the year. For the full year, the NSO had projected the economy to grow at 7.6 per cent. However, excluding net taxes on products, growth in gross value added by all sectors in the economy had slowed down from 8.2 per cent in the first quarter to 7.7 per cent in the second quarter and further to 6.5 per cent in the third quarter. This raised questions over the underlying momentum in the economy. Now, a study on the state of the economy prepared by economists at the Reserve Bank of India suggests that the growth momentum remains healthy. The study pegs growth for the fourth quarter (January-March) at 7.2 per cent. This is higher than the 5.9 per cent growth implied in the NSO’s estimates. A higher growth would, in turn, mean that the economy is likely to grow at closer to 8 per cent in 2023-24, higher than the NSO’s assessment. Further, the study projects growth for the next year (2024-25) at 7.4 per cent, higher than the RBI’s forecast of 7 per cent presented in the last monetary policy committee’s meeting. This is good news.

However, despite this healthy momentum, private consumption remains subdued, growing at just around 3 per cent. There are pointers to a continuing unevenness in demand across various consumption segments. For instance, there are indications of the FMCG sector witnessing moderate growth, even as premium consumer businesses remain robust. This, as the study also points out, implies that there are “significant per capita income shifts underway”. On investment activity, while capital expenditure by governments, in both Centre and states, has been steady, and bank and corporate balance sheets are healthy, there are questions over a broad-based revival in private capex. More so, when the capacity utilisation rates in several segments have reached levels at which new investments are called for.

The study notes the divergence between food and core inflation. Food inflation had edged upwards to 8.66 per cent in February, while core inflation had moderated to 3.4 per cent as per estimates. Inflation remained elevated in cereals, eggs, vegetables and pulses, while it eased across various non-food and non-fuel segments. This poses a dilemma for monetary policy at a time when the global economy is losing steam. According to the report, the momentum in global growth slowed down in the first quarter of 2024, the global supply chain pressures index saw an uptick, and geopolitical

risks remain heightened. This uncertain economic environment requires deft policy management.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 30-3-2024

Terms of Trade | What explains the disconnect between economic inequality and politics in India?

Roshan Kishore

The Paris-based World Inequality Lab recently published a paper which claims that economic inequality in India is the highest it has ever been since the British Raj. Like every other empirical study on the Indian economy, this one has also created a debate on the merits, or lack of it, of both the data and the methodology. The Chief Economic Advisor himself has written an article in *Mint* criticising the findings of the paper. Such debates, to be sure, are neither the first nor the last we have or will see on the Indian economy. Unless the government decides to publish granular and regular data on consumption and inequality-related topics, a lot of these debates will be of the kind of one economist's word and assumptions against another rather than objective and data-driven.

These debates, however, are not the concern of this column, as was the case when it spoke about a renewed interest in India's poverty levels after the publication of the 2022-23 Household Consumer Expenditure Survey (HCES). The point that the poverty column made was simple. While there is a widespread agreement about the fact that poverty has been falling in India in the post-reform period, politicians and government have been spending more rather than less money on fighting poverty in India, it argued.

The interplay of inequality with politics is very different from the dialectic between poverty and politics in India. Even the most vocal supporters of the government or those who criticise the likes of World Inequality Lab paper authors (this also includes Thomas Piketty, one of the most influential voices on inequality in today's world) will not argue that inequality has been eradicated like extreme poverty in India. The debate between the two camps, at most, is about minor changes in the direction of inequality rather than its existence per se.

This broad intellectual consensus, however, has had a completely opposite political reaction. Almost every major political party in India has pretty much given up on the idea of politically weaponising inequality and is more than happy to throw palliatives at the (as ironic as it sounds, statistically) non-existent poverty problem. In fact, one can very well argue that there has been a bipartisan consensus over following policies which have added to economic inequality (along with growth) in the post-reform period in India. Tax holidays to investors, reduction in corporation tax rates, abolition of wealth tax, and dilution of labour laws are some such examples.

What explains this asymmetry between the political and economic takes on poverty and inequality in India? The question can have multiple answers and it is very likely that almost all of them are right.

The first could be that, unlike many emerging market economies in Southeast Asia and Latin America, the Indian economy has never had a financial or economic meltdown. This has basically meant that a very large majority of the proverbial middle class has never faced an economic shock which inflicts a significant deterioration in income and wealth levels. The Indian deep state, or at least its economic component, can rightly claim credit for having steered the economic ship clear of such a disaster. To come back to political perception, it also means that the middle classes do not really see the ruling class and their super-rich allies as somebody who has accumulated their fortunes at the cost of the non-rich. In fact, one could very well argue that a large number of Indians see success stories of super-rich capitalists in the post-reform period as their own success stories because of the jobs they have landed in the modern service sector.

The second part of the story is about the people who were foot soldiers in the fight against inequality in the immediate aftermath of Independence. Land ownership in large parts of India was extremely concentrated during the British Raj and the dominance of landed interests within the Congress party ensured that there was no substantive change in the situation after 1947. This generated a lot of tailwinds for radical redistributive politics in rural India. While the Communists were the primary beneficiaries of this politics, this assertion also played a role in the evolution of backward caste politics against (primarily) upper-caste feudal interests in large parts of the country. What did this politics stall in the post-reform period? The simplest answer to this question is that the site of class struggle collapsed, which also made rewards from this kind of class politics completely redundant. This is what the systemic viability crisis of agriculture has done to the rural class struggle and redistributive politics in India. The fact that India never put restrictions on rural-to-urban migration unlike countries such as China has also played a role in bringing down class temperatures in rural areas. What we see in the name of farmers' movements today is more a struggle by relatively well-off farmers to keep the terms of trade in their favour rather than militant class politics.

The third explanation could be that the fight against inequality has been sidetracked in a direction which makes the right criticism about the historical roots of inequality but lacks the vision to build a broad-based fight against it in the present. This is the continuing dominance of social identities over their class counterpart in the political discourse over inequality in India. This process has led to the proliferation of a bunch of regional political outfits, which are led by

politicians who treat these as their family enterprises and have amassed vast fortunes compared to the masses they claim to represent.

Will these three in-built roadblocks against a wider and forward-looking political struggle against inequality change in the near term? It would be nihilistic to wish for the disappearance of the first roadblock. A motivated class struggle in India's farms is more in the realm of the romantic rather than *realpolitik*. Caste-based politics, even if it does not give economic redistribution, does offer other community and network services to its followers. This, when read with continuing social prejudice, will ensure that caste continues to play an important role in driving politics at the grassroots level in India.

Does this make politics against inequality a lost cause in India? One should never say never in politics and there is one factor which is yet to test its political salience. What if the mass upward mobility potential of reforms is beginning to taper off for India at a time when aspirations and expectations are growing exponentially? We will see the interplay of this dialectic in the next decade or so.

Roshan Kishore, HT's Data and Political Economy Editor, writes a weekly column on the state of the country's economy and its political fall out, and vice-versa

THE HINDU, DELHI 27-3-2024

A cry for help, a call for reflection and action

The unyielding quest for scholastic distinction often causes many an Indian student to go into a spiral, with tragic outcomes

Sumant Kumaro

The current socio-academic climate in India raises significant concerns in the context of the nurturing of students. The transformation of socio-economic dynamics is not only instilling a sense of despondency among youth but is also becoming a cause for stress in their academic endeavours. This often causes students to go into a spiral, manifesting itself tragically in a spate of suicides.

Take for example, reports of a note that a teenager from Bihar wrote before fading away in Kota, Rajasthan (the hub of tuition/coaching). The stress that the child was facing was evident in the reference to the 'Joint Entrance Examination' (JEE) that the child was preparing for. In 2023, there were reports of youngsters preparing for various competitive exams in Kota ending their lives. Based on police records, 15 students faded away in 2022; 18 in 2019 and 20 in 2018. There was negligible data during the COVID-19 pandemic years of 2020-21 when traditional coaching centres were either closed or operated virtually.

The need to examine the examination system

Every year, over 2,00,000 aspirants from every corner of India flock to Kota in pursuit of 'academic excellence', to prepare rigorously for 'coveted' entrance examinations such as the JEE and the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET), the gateways to engineering and medical education in India, respectively. Enrolling in its residential coaching institutes, they ensure that Kota's economy thrives — an impressive annual revenue of "approximately ₹10,000 crore" due to these educational pursuits.

While the children pursue their goals, the management of these institutes have taken several significant, yet sombre, measures. Hostels have now been equipped with 'anti-suicide features' that include devices fixed to ceiling fans to prevent children from harming themselves and iron grills across balconies and passage ways. However, it is difficult to maintain uniformity in the approximately 25,000 paying guest accommodations in Kota.

In another preventive measure, the local government has stopped all routine testing in coaching institutes for over two months as a temporary measure. Hostel staff are also being trained and prepared to deal with the welfare of their wards. In the push towards professional development there is specialised training in mess administration, psychological support, behavioural counselling and an emphasis on overall student welfare. The Kota police have pushed hostel wardens to become more proactive by endorsing campaigns such as "darwaze pe dastak (knock on door)," while kitchen workers and meal service providers have been encouraged to alert authorities immediately if they notice students missing their meals or leaving their food untouched.

In 2022, according to data in the "Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India 2022" report by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), over 13,044 Indian students ended their lives — 7.6% of the total suicide fatalities in that year. Another grim statistic was that the number of suicides (students) rose from 10,335 in 2019, to 12,526 in 2020, to 13,089 in 2021. As in NCRB data (2018), nearly 95,000 students faded away between 2007-18.

There is also another grim fact. Over half of India's populace, specifically 53.7%, is made up of individuals under the age of 25. However, a significant barrier to their entry into the labour force is widespread deficiency in essential skills. The last decade has seen a distressing rise in student suicides, which is also connected to a lack of viable job opportunities.

The education system

In contemporary India, the lack of (suitable) job opportunities, a limited number of seats in government institutions and the high fees charged in private institutions have all created a climate where there is intense competition. This is deeply troubling and an issue that requires urgent attention. The relentless strain

of competition plays on the young student, which is made worse by the pressures imposed on the child by parents without understanding their child's wishes. While some are coerced, often relentlessly, into achieving the 'pinnacle' of academic excellence, others are urged to aspire for admission in a 'desired institution'. Many others face harsh criticism for failing to 'meet expectations'. When the weight of these demands proves unbearable, or their aspirations seem impossible to satisfy, some choose to escape all of this in a tragic way.

An All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report (2019-20), showed that only 21.4% of colleges are under governmental administration, with 78.6% under private entities (as reported by the Union Education Ministry). A study in 2008 in *The Lancet* revealed that nearly 61% of global suicide fatalities were concentrated in Asia. Numerous families in India (especially in the middle and lower-income brackets), face financial constraints that prevent them from providing their children with supplementary educational resources such as coaching and tuition. This lack of support in turn places immense and intense pressure on students to succeed in examinations of various kinds. A lack of success then leads to tragedy. Additionally, there are numerous instances of faculty members in institutions often chastising students for their subpar academic performance, when they should be offering encouragement and assistance instead.

Society and family expectations

In contemporary Indian society, there is a noticeable shift in family structures with a weakening of crucial connections between children and their families. This in turn impacts a child's ability to engage with their relatives. Various factors influence a child's development within the Indian context, in turn affecting social relationships. The lack of establishing strong bonds between parents and children becomes clear when parents impose their academic preferences on their child. Parental control, emotional detachment, and societal expectations contribute to the sidelining of a student's individual interests. As a result, students grapple with the hurdle of meeting parental standards, especially when they have no innate interest in the subject or course forced upon them. A feature in Indian society is the emphasis on expectations, performance, and personal interests in family interactions. These dynamics can either propel students forward through positive reinforcement or negatively affect them due to socio-economic circumstances.

The inability to satisfy parental expectations can leave young individuals feeling humiliated, dejected, desperate, and harassed. It is crucial to create an atmosphere of empathy and acceptance to cancel out any potential negative consequences for our younger generation.

The unyielding quest for scholastic distinction often overshadows the social facets of a student's existence, driving them to sacrifice interpersonal bonds and pursuits that are essential for a well-rounded persona. It is disconcerting to find young students voicing their inner turmoil on social media, signalling distress. Educational purveyors themselves fail to provide the requisite emotional scaffolding that these young minds require. Moreover, pupils from socioeconomically underserved communities are confronted with the stark actualities of endemic discrimination, thereby intensifying their hardships.

So, it becomes clear that there is an urgent need for our social infrastructure to grow more supportive and accommodative and support these young lives.

Those in distress are encouraged to seek professional help, visit counsellors or call helplines

Sumant Kumar is Assistant Professor in the Alliance School of Liberal Arts, Alliance University

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 29-3-2024
Another Kota suicide sounds alarm as deaths continue despite panels, measures, guidelines

Senjuti Sengupta

In August 2023, panicked by a surging number of suicides in Kota, the Rajasthan town which has become the centre of India's test-prep coaching centre business, the district administration ordered that all ceiling fans in hostels and paying guest accommodations must be covered with an "anti-suicide device". A month later, more comprehensive guidelines followed, including mandatory classes for teachers, and regular flying checks of coaching centres and hostels by the district administration. Yet, six months after these measures were put in place, suicides in Kota have continued, with another student dying on Wednesday night. According to data from the Rajasthan Police, 15 students died by suicide in 2022, and the number peaked alarmingly in 2023, reaching 27 through the year — the highest since such deaths have been recorded from 2015 onwards. Now, Wednesday night's suicide takes the 2024 tally up to seven in the first three months of 2024, with three suicides recorded in March alone — keeping pace with last year's number. This comes one day after a 20-year-old NEET aspirant from Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh, was found dead at his rented accommodation in the Vigyan Vihar area.

The station house officer (SHO) at Jawahar Nagar police station, Kamallesh Kumar, said that the 20-year-old woman who died on Wednesday lived in a paying guest accommodation, and was in Kota for over a year preparing for the pre-medical entrance test NEET. "The incident came to light when her neighbours found that she did not come out of her room to take the lunch and dinner boxes the entire day. Her landlord found the body when they broke open the door. No suicide note

has been recovered from the spot and her parents have been informed. The body has been sent to the Kota MBS hospital and a medical board has been formed for an autopsy,” Kumar said.

The officer also said that they were investigating why the hostel had not installed spring-loaded fans as per the district administration guidelines. “A probe against the hostel authorities will be initiated once the police submit a report to the district collector in this regard,” he added. Kota is the centre of India’s test-prep business, estimated to be worth ₹10,000 crore annually by officials in the district administration.

Students from across the country arrive in the city and register in tuition centres that offer courses that prepare students for competitive examinations such as NEET and Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) for engineering colleges. But over the years, even if some students have found success, there is ample evidence that many find the grind stressful, living pigeon-holed in hostels and paying guest accommodations that have mushroomed across the city.

Experts have said these students — many of them out of their homes for the first time — find the workload stressful, and the pressure from peers, parents and teachers unbearable.

Amid the surge in suicides in 2023, the district administration ordered all hostels to install spring-loaded fans to “provide students mental support and security”, promising extensive monitoring. But since the day this order was issued, at least five students have died by suicide by hanging themselves.

HT reached out to two of these five hostels on Wednesday, and both said that they received no visit from an official team before the deaths in their institutions. A director of a Mahaveer Nagar hostel in which a Chhattisgarh-based JEE aspirant died on February 13 said, “No official ever visited our hostel before the suicide. But we were arranging the set-up to install the anti-suicide device when the student died.” The hostel was sealed on February 16 for breach of guidelines.

On September 28 last year, the Rajasthan government rolled out a series of measures to prevent suicides — mandatory screening test for incoming students, alphabetical sorting into sections instead of ranking-based divisions, and regular checks of hostel accommodations. This February, the district administration set up a nine-member team to monitor the execution of guidelines in hostels and other rented accommodations following concerns that they were not being taken seriously. “In all the five cases of suicides (between September 2023 and February 2024), the absence of anti-suicide device is a common issue. The hostel staff also do not participate in mandatory gate-keeping sessions regularly. Our nine member team will visit hostels and PG’s everyday and prepare a detailed

report,” Sunita Daga, the nodal officer of the team said at the time.

On Wednesday, Daga told HT that only half of the survey work was complete so far. “50% of the survey work is completed which has been conducted across hostels and PG’s. Our team is trying to cover every place. Once it is completed we will discuss our findings with the collector and take further action,” she said.

ADM Mukesh Choudhary said that another issue confronting the administration was that not every hostel that offered students places to live is registered, which makes them difficult to track. “We are trying to address this issue and talks are underway with other officials. But necessary action will be taken against each of them found violating the guidelines.”

Experts, however, said that a primary problem was that government was approaching the problem “mechanically.” “This is a situation that requires much more than just guidelines,” sociologist Rajeev Gupta said. “The need of the hour is a multidimensional psychological counselling of students.”

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 22-3-2024

External debt crosses \$100b

for first time

Md Mehedi Hasan

Bangladesh’s external debt has crossed the \$100 billion mark for the first time, indicating a challenging future amid foreign exchange shortage.

At the end of 2023, the overall external debt stood at \$100.6 billion, up from \$96.5 billion a year earlier, as per the latest data from the Bangladesh Bank.

Of the external debt, \$79.69 billion was taken by the public sector and the rest by the private sector. About 85 percent of the loans are long-term and the rest are short-term.

The debt buildup, which is still within the threshold recommended by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), is becoming a headache for the country given the unfavourable developments on various economic fronts. “This is concerning that the external debt is increasing,” said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh.

To tackle the situation, the supplier credit that is being taken from China and Russia must be stopped now, he said.

Supplier credit is an agreement in a commercial contract under which an exporter will supply goods or services to a foreign buyer on credit terms.

If external debt continues to rise, with it the repayment challenges will mount as the country’s earning capacity is slowing, both in terms of revenue and foreign exchange, said Mansur, a former economist of the IMF.

Both external debt and debt servicing are growing, said Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

In the first five months of the fiscal year, the government's spending on interest payments for foreign debt surged 136.7 percent year-on-year to \$562 million. "The latest batch of external debt is costly, so we have to be alert that there is no problem in debt servicing," Rahman said.

The returns against the foreign loans are coming in local currency and because of the devaluation of the local currency against the dollar, the cost of foreign debt will increase, he said.

The foreign loans that are piled up in the pipeline for projects will have to be ranging from 400 to 1400 in those wells. Water with EC up to 1,000 can be considered fresh water but the normal EC for groundwater should not exceed 200-300."

The density of salinity in the monitoring wells, which are usually 80-100ft deep, located near fish farms was seen to be high, he said.

The survey showed Rajshahi's Durgapur upazila to have the highest level of salinity in its groundwater.

Conducted in four wells in the upazila, the survey results showed the EC in those wells ranged between 800 and 1,400, meaning the amount of salt ranged between 520 and 911 mg per litre of water.

The second highest level of salinity, between 953 and 1,218 EC, was found in the well near Rajbari in the same district's Puthia upazila.

"We have spoken to the local farmers and came to know that they have been using considerable amounts of salt in their fish ponds for over 20 years to get rid of certain bacteria. Local fisheries officers also acknowledged this," Anwar said.

Md Ilias, a fish farmer of Durgapur upazila, said they use the salt to get rid of bacteria that cause skin diseases on the fish during winter.

"We dump around 50kgs of salt in our three-acre pond twice every winter."

In some areas, farmers have been doing the same for around 40 years, and the salt reaches the groundwater during its recharging process, according to the BWDB official.

Groundwater recharge is a hydrologic process where water moves downward from surface water to groundwater.

On the other hand, the survey found that the salinity level in the monitoring wells of Bagmara upazila were not overwhelming as the number of ponds is less.

Meanwhile, the salinity was also less in Naogaon Atrai upazila and Natore's Singra upazila because fish farming had begun only recently in those places, Dr Anwar explained.

In the wells in Atrai, the EC was between 347 and 410, while in Singra, they were from 400 to 600.

Abdul Wahed, deputy director of Rajshahi division's fisheries department, said there is no doubt the farmers use salt in their ponds.

"However, the amount isn't so much that the groundwater would become saline."

Anward Zahid said that while the salt used is still within a tolerable level, as fish farming is gaining popularity, the continued use of salt would become a matter of grave concern.

"The water in our coastal zone have already turned saline due to sea water intrusion. Now, the groundwater in our northern region having increased levels of salinity has become a new cause for our concern."

Salinity, he said, is already a big worry for Bangladesh. Saline water has intruded into at least 100 rivers and affected around 15 percent of the country's total croplands in the south-western coastal districts due to climate change and human intervention mainly from neighbouring India.

According to a Soil Salinity Map, by the Soil Resource and Development Institute, based on data from 2009, showed that in 1973 at least 0.83 million hectares of land was saline. That area has now expanded to 1.05 million hectares in 93 upazilas, which makes up more than half the coastal land mass in the Ganges floodplain. A recent study by Khulna University found more than half of the arable lands in 21 coastal districts salinity affected.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 17-3-2024

Price cap is not working

Govt move to rein in prices brings little relief for consumers

Shaheen Mollah And Ashik Abdullah Apu

The price cap on 29 commodities exists on paper only as most of those items are being sold at prices higher than those fixed by the government.

Visiting Karwan Bazar, Kochukhet, Ibrahimpur and Mirpur-14 kitchen markets in Dhaka yesterday, The Daily Star found that traders were selling the essentials at the previously hiked prices.

Grass peas were being sold for Tk 130-140 a kg against the government-fixed rate of Tk 92.61.

Vegetables like cabbage, cauliflower, beans, aubergine, green chillies, tomatoes, and pumpkin sold at prices higher by Tk 10 to 40 per kg than the government-fixed rates.

Some retailers yesterday claimed they were unaware of the latest price capping, while others opined that this move will not work unless the supply of essentials picks up. They said they cannot cut the prices as the wholesalers charge them higher rates.

"The prices fixed by the government are much lower than our purchase prices from wholesalers. If the government can cut the wholesale prices of commodities, then we will be able to sell those at the government-fixed rates," Md Gofran, owner of a grocery shop at Karwan Bazar, told The Daily Star.

This means the government's move to rein in the commodity prices fall flat again.

Earlier on September 14 last year, the government fixed the prices of eggs, onions and potatoes after the prices of these essentials shot up. However, the authorities concerned could not enforce the price cap despite raids by different government agencies in different wholesale and retail markets.

Latest, the Department of Agricultural Marketing (DAM) on Friday fixed prices of 29 commodities from producer to consumer level. A day after the decision, most of the essentials were selling at a much higher prices.

The government fixed the price of goat meat at Tk 1003.56 per kg, but the item was sold for Tk 1,050 yesterday.

Chicken (Sonali) was sold for Tk 320-330 a kg, up from Tk 262 fixed by the DAM.

Prices of different varieties of pulses, including red lentils, moong, and mashkalai, were Tk 5 to 35 higher than the cap prices.

Of the 29 items, only eggs and katla fish were sold at the government-fixed rates -- Tk 10-10.50 per egg and Tk 300-400 per kg of katla fish.

Traders, however, said prices of these two commodities had been unchanged for three to four days before the government fixed their rates.

Amid such a situation, the people from limited- and low-income families are struggling to cope with the rising prices of essentials.

Many consumers say fixing the prices of essentials never worked before and it will not work in future either.

"It's nothing but a farce. I heard that the prices of 29 commodities have been fixed but I know the prices would not be effective," Abul Hossen, a consumer, told this newspaper at Kochukhet Bazar.

SM Nazir Hossain, vice-president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, said the government had capped prices on some daily essentials before, but those were hardly enforced.

"The authorities just fixed the prices and didn't take measures to enforce those. Price capping should be done considering the actual market situation. The authorities concerned should sit with the traders, NBR and other stakeholders to find a solution and give some relief to consumers," he added.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 24-3-2024

BD willing to invest \$1b in Bhutans Dorjilung Hydro Power Project

Shahnaj Begum

Bangladesh is set to invest \$1 billion in the Bhutans 1,125 megawatt Dorjilung Hydropower Project, through trilateral cooperation with India.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has made the proposal once again for discussion during the upcoming bi-lateral meeting between the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and

Bhutanese King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, scheduled for March 25.

Bhutanese King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck is set to arrive in Dhaka on Monday to join the Independence Day celebrations on March 26. Bangladesh is in talks with Bhutan, India, Myanmar, and Nepal to import electricity to meet its growing energy demand. Bangladesh plans to import 9,000 MW of electricity from the neighbouring countries, however, the country has already imported around 1726 MW of electricity from India.

In May 12, 2016 the then Bangladesh Foreign Minister Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali discussed the proposal with his Bhutanese counterpart Damcho Dorji. It has been estimated that by engaging more in cross-border energy trade, South Asian countries could save over \$9 billion annually and reduce carbon emissions by 8 per cent jointly, an Asian Development Bank study has said.

"India has, in principle, agreed to Bangladesh's proposal to invest in the project and provide transit for transmission of electricity from Bhutan. The three countries are working to finalize a draft memorandum of understanding (MoU) for the project, which would diversify energy markets of Bangladesh and Bhutan, and further build energy trade and cooperation among the three countries....we hope this time it will get a different momentum," a senior official of the Power Division said. Meanwhile, a bilateral meeting on electricity cooperation was held between Bangladesh and India on January 4, 2023 in New Delhi, India, State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Nasrul Hamid sought "visible Indian cooperation" for importing hydropower from Bhutan and Nepal. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has also sought support from the Indian side to import electricity from Bhutan smoothly during a recent meeting with the Indian High Commissioner Pronoy Verma.

The proposed trilateral MoU between Bangladesh, Bhutan and India for cooperation in the field of hydroelectric power on the principles of an agreed regional framework would influence the collective efforts of Bangladesh in resolving its power deficit.

"Cooperation in tourism to maximise its potential is another win-win area. Cooperation in other sectors, including ICT, connectivity, health, agriculture, education, culture, water resources will also be discussed during the meeting," a senior official of the Foreign Ministry has said.

The issue of using of Inland Waterways for Transportation of Bilateral Trade and Transit Cargoes between Bhutan and Bangladesh and the way for opening up the connectivity with Chittagong and Mongla ports will also be discussed in the meeting, he added.

However, Bangladesh, in negotiations with Bhutan, is expected to export more products, such as ready-made garments, ceramics, pharmaceuticals, jute and allied

products, leather goods, toiletries and agricultural produce, while Bhutan has agreed to facilitate entry for these products to promote trade and investments between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Bhutan and Bangladesh entered into a trade agreement in 1980 under which Bangladesh granted duty-free access to 18 products from Bhutan. The total bilateral trade volume has been on the rise over the past decade and, more than US\$100 million, Bhutans exports to Bangladesh recorded their highest value in 2017.

Bangladesh has emerged as a favoured destination for higher studies for Bhutanese students, especially for courses in health and medical sciences, this time Bangladesh wants to help Bhutan to establish a burn hospital there.

Meanwhile, a senior official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has said that the king will attend the Independence Day celebrations on March 26. He will pay respect to Bangladesh's war heroes at the National Martyrs Memorial in Savar and attend President Mohammed Shahabuddin's formal programme at the Bangabhaban and visit the proposed "Bhutanese Special Economic Zone" in Kurigram, a joint initiative of the governments of Bangladesh and Bhutan.

The district administration has already handed over 133.92 acres of Khas land under Madhabaram Mauza of Bhogdanga Union to Beza.

"A memorandum of understanding is expected to be signed between the two countries during the Kings visit.

After completing the overall legal process between the two countries and preparing the space, it will be possible to start the full operation of the SEZ within the next three years. If the economic zone is opened, it will create employment for the people of Kurigram," Beza Executive Chairman Shaikh Yusuf Harun said.

Bhutanese King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck will return to Bhutan via India using the Sonahat Land Port of Bhurungamari Upazila of the district.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 20-3-2024

Ease visa process for Bangladeshis

Hasan Mahmud requests visiting Irish minister

UNB, Dhaka

Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud yesterday invited Irish investment in Bangladesh, particularly in agro-processing, pharmaceuticals and IT sectors.

He also requested easier visa processes for Bangladeshi students and IT professionals.

During the meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Irish Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment Simon Coveney congratulated Mahmud on his new role and praised Bangladesh's economic growth.

Hasan Mahmud sought Ireland's support for EU's EBA trade preferences to Bangladesh until Both

GSP+ benefits beyond 2032.

Coveney said exchanging delegations will enhance bilateral trade, particularly in technology, pharmaceuticals, and energy.

He assured support for Bangladesh's appeal for extending trade preferences of EBA facilities until 2032 and GSP+ facilities beyond 2032 and an additional 1.5 million euros in humanitarian assistance for Rohingyas.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 19-3-2024

GDP to grow by +1.9% YoY in 2024

Sri Lankan Economy rebounds in 2H 2023

The Sri Lankan economy continues to grow off a low base in 4Q 2023 with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 4Q2023 growing by +4.5% YoY (vs. -12.4% contraction in 4Q2022) says CT CLSA SECURITIES (PVT) LTD on their Gross Domestic Product report. GDP is forecast to grow by +1.9% YoY in 2024.

This was slightly above our expectations with the economy shifting gears for a growth phase after the contractions recorded in the last few quarters. Growth was driven by expansion in activities in all three major economic sectors with the highest growth being recorded in the Industries sector.

Growth was supported by easing interest rates after elevated inflation levels were brought to single digits. With the support of growth in the 2H2023 the contraction in economic activities slowed down with the GDP for 2023 reporting a contraction of -2.3% (vs. -7.8% in 2022). The industries sector reported the highest contraction during the period. Contraction in the sector was aggravated by a reduction of output from mining and quarrying, manufacturing textile and apparel, and construction activities during the period.

"With the CBSL's growth prospects fueling the economy with precautionary policy rate cuts aiding for expansion in the economy, we have revised up our GDP forecast to an expansion of +1.9% YoY (vs. +1.7% previously forecasted)".

"Inflation levels at low single digits will support consumer disposable income to stabilize in the near term, with the reduction in electricity tariffs, further increase in public sector and private sector salaries ahead of the New Year season."

Growth in industrial activities and services activities reported by PMI was commendable in recent months, primarily driven by seasonal demand, indicating growth in GDP in 1Q2024E. The report adds that an increase in private consumption from falling interest rates, VAT hike will keep disposable income levels in check and recovery in the manufacturing and services activities fueled by a recovery in industries and tourism will aid the growth in economic activities in 2024 year end.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 20-3-2024
**SL showing signs of stability, recovery
 from economic crisis – ADB**

Sri Lanka is showing signs of stability and recovery from a deep economic crisis. Data shows that Sri Lanka's inflation significantly declined from 69.8% to 4.0% between September 2022 and December 2023. Foreign exchange reserves have increased to \$4.4 billion in 2023 from \$1.9 billion in 2022.

Sri Lanka's economic growth returned to positive territory in the second half of 2023 and that momentum is likely to continue, The Asian Development Bank (ADB) said.

Meanwhile the ADB has launched a new country partnership strategy (CPS) for Sri Lanka covering the period 2024–2028. The strategy will focus on restoring the country's macroeconomic stability, reviving growth, and establishing the foundation for sustainable recovery and resilience.

"This new partnership strategy will build on ADB's ongoing assistance to support the country's efforts to restore macroeconomic stability, and to achieve green and long-term sustainable growth," said ADB Country Director for Sri Lanka Takafumi Kadono.

"The CPS responds to Sri Lanka's economic situation by tailoring ADB assistance to address the country's long-standing macroeconomic imbalances and structural impediments through knowledge solutions, policy advisory support, and priority investments."

ADB's assistance under the new CPS for Sri Lanka will focus on three strategic objectives: strengthening public financial management and governance; fostering private sector development promoting green growth; and improving access to climate-smart public services and deepening inclusion.

The new CPS will support the country's efforts to tackle the key underlying causes of the crisis. ADB will focus on reforming the public financial management system, strengthening governance, accelerating domestic resource mobilization, and improving fiscal and debt sustainability, as well as measures to improve the performance of state-owned enterprises.

The strategy recognizes the critical role of the private sector in the country's recovery and long-term economic growth. Structural reforms to promote greater private sector participation in the economy and diversify the economy with emphasis on green and sustainable growth will be supported under the new strategy. ADB will continue to support financial inclusion and small and medium-sized enterprises development, especially those managed by women, and provide advisory and capacity building support to promote trade and investment. The strategy aims to improve access to climate-smart public services and deepen inclusion through strengthening social protection and human

capital development and fostering agriculture modernization.

As of the end of December 2023, ADB had committed more than \$3.7 billion in 45 public sector loans and grants in Sri Lanka, as well as \$25.6 million in private sector investments.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 28-3-2024
**Japanese investor to develop Pettah
 floating market**

Irangika Range

Urban Development and Housing Minister Prasanna Ranatunga said yesterday that the floating market in Pettah will be developed as a major tourist hotspot targeting more foreign investments to the country. Various accusations were made against the Urban Development Authority over the past period that this floating market is not properly managed.

Minister Ranatunga having paid attention to this, advised the Urban Development Authority to work on developing this market under public-private partnership as it is difficult to develop this with the state funds due to the current economic problems of the country.

Then, the Urban Development Authority invited potential investors to invest in this. Accordingly, a Japanese investor came forward to invest in this project. Therefore, the floating market will be developed as a Japanese city cum floating market.

The signing of the initial memorandum of understanding for redeveloping the floating market in Pettah was held yesterday at the Urban Development Authority, Battaramulla under the patronage of Urban Development Authority Chairman Nimesh Herath and the Japanese investor Akira Hirose. Accordingly, the management and running of the floating market will be done by this Japanese investment.

Minister Prasanna Ranatunga has instructed the Urban Development Authority to take steps to develop this in a manner that does not cause any injustice to the shop owners who are currently doing business there.

The Pettah floating Market is located at Bastion Mawatha, Colombo. It has 92 stalls and there are also a number of stalls installed on boats in the Beira Lake.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 29-3-2024

Tapping into foreign debt markets

Nepal is unlikely to domestically secure huge investments to fulfil its ambitions.

Shabda Gyawali, Pragres Acharya

The global bond market dwarfs the equity market by at least three times, with an estimated worth of \$126.9 trillion. As Nepal will be spotlighted during the upcoming Investment Summit on April 23-24, we need to seize the opportunity and not limit ourselves to funding only via equity instruments. The alternative is debt instruments. Equity instruments, such as 'ordinary shares', are used to own a company, whereas debt

instruments, such as bonds, debentures and loans, are used by the company to borrow.

Nepal is projected to require a minimum of \$40 billion over the coming decade to fulfil ambitions in the energy sector, including infrastructure investments. At least \$20 billion is needed to invest in energy projects to meet exports and rising domestic demand. It is unlikely that investments of such magnitude can be secured domestically. The total lending capacity of the local banks is around \$46 billion, which is growing, on average, by 12 to 15 percent annually. However, investment demand is more than double the growth rate. Their ability to fund larger projects is also limited due to their internal concentration risks. Further, there are demands from other competing sectors. Consequently, renewable energy projects must actively seek external funding, recognising that reliance solely on equity investments is impractical, given that debt constitutes 70 to 75 percent of renewable energy projects' financing.

This sets the stage for targeting the huge international bond market. With the current momentum in the global green bond market, coupled with Nepal's prowess in hydroelectric and solar power and vulnerability to climate change, Nepal finds itself with a significant tailwind. The choice

lies with Nepal: Resist the wind or embrace it. Ironically, it seems more difficult to resist.

The global GSS+ (social, sustainability, sustainability-linked, and transition-labelled) bond market boasts a staggering value of over \$3.5 trillion. The demand for green bonds consistently outstrips the available supply, and the market share has surged from a mere 0.3 percent in 2012 to a substantial 3 percent in 2022. This growth is remarkable, considering the rapid expansion of the overall bond market. Nepal can tap into this burgeoning climate finance pool by leveraging international bond markets. This can help Nepal address energy funding shortfalls. This read focuses on corporate or non-government issues of bonds to address the gap. However, this strategy has its challenges, and it'll take some elbow grease to make it happen.

Nepal doesn't have a credit rating, which is an anchor for international bond investors to assess country risk and decide whether they want to take the risk of lending to Nepali projects. If they do, it determines the price they'd be willing to pay. The absence of such a rating could make investors not bother due to uncertainty. While efforts are underway to secure that, there's concern about the potential consequences. Some fear that obtaining a rating might open the floodgates to excessive government borrowing, potentially leading Nepal into a cycle of unsustainable debt.

Nepal's guardians harbour more anxiety about the skill of the sword master—the handler of borrowed funds—than they do about the blade itself (the loan). As of July 2023, Nepal's debt-to-GDP ratio stood at 43 percent,

with external debt comprising 22 percent of GDP, indicating a healthy

status compared to the cautionary threshold of 50 percent. Furthermore, this figure is effectively lower, given that all debt thus far has been concessional, with an average interest rate on foreign loans of less than 1 percent and a total outflow of less than 4.5 percent of outstanding debt, including the principal. Additionally, current account receipts outweigh external debt outflows by a factor of 35, demonstrating robust financial health. However, the well-wishers perceive Nepal's cautious borrowing practices as an outcome of necessity rather than a choice, expressing scepticism about the ability to exercise prudence when granted greater discretion. They fear that obtaining a credit rating could open the door to higher-cost commercial market debt that exceeds the current low rates.

The absence of a robust history of bond issuance by both Nepal and its corporate entities is another problem, resulting in a perceived lack of credibility. Bond investors/lenders find themselves in a fog of uncertainty about the reliability of bond offerings coming out of the country. They also grapple with the daunting task of pricing various risks while struggling to replicate a dependable structure. This could result in absurdly high-risk premiums higher than what the Nepali market would be or 'should be' willing to pay. All these conundrums can be tossed into the broad basket of the missing country-specific yield curve. But remember, broad strokes sometimes miss the quirks that complete the picture.

The international bond investors are also unaware of the track record of the sole off-taker of energy in Nepal, the NEA. While the NEA has yet to default, its reliability has yet to be convincingly demonstrated to international bond investors. Even if investors harbour confidence in the NEA's track record, the unpredictability of government policies in developing countries, the dearth of effective governance structures and the absence of contract adherence could prompt investors to search for an umbrella even on a sunny day. While the sun may be shining now, you never know when a sudden downpour might catch you off guard.

It's not the intention to state that these problems plague Nepal. Yet, as a developing nation, Nepal bears the weight of generalised labels and conceptions. The burden of proof to shake off these labels falls squarely on Nepal's shoulders. The effective way to shake off these labels is to have a history of successful bond issuances. However, this means that the inflated risk premiums in issuances before having a 'history' burden the bonds with a weightier price tag.

Now that it appears having a history of bond issuances will kickstart a chain reaction, fuelling further bond issues and setting in motion a positive feedback loop, a question persists:

How to start? For every 'history', there must have been a first move. Common sense dictates that these initial steps be deliberate, cautious, and accompanied by ample support. Could the rise in commercial foreign public debt and private sector bond borrowing, influenced by the country's credit rating, exhaust foreign currency reserves or plunge the nation into a debt trap? The second (final) part of the article to be published next week will discuss this.

Gyawali is the head of investment at Dolma Foundation, and Acharya is a finance professional at Dolma Foundation.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 22-3-2024

Nepal, Germany conclude bilateral consultation meeting

Post Report

KATHMANDU, Nepal and Germany held a bilateral consultation on Wednesday. The meeting focused on Nepal's graduation plan and cooperation in climate change and the energy sector.

Erik Kurzweil, ambassador, Indo-Pacific Policy, South Asia and Afghanistan at the German Federal Foreign Office, and Ganesh Prasad Dhakal, joint-secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, concluded the political consultation meeting, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement.

Several matters related to bilateral ties between the two countries, including the invitation to President Ramchandra Paudel to visit Germany, Nepal's graduation from a Least Developed Country, cooperation in climate change and energy sector, peace process, democracy and social inclusion, cooperation in the cultural field, visa permits and working status for German NGOs, were discussed at the meeting.

The meeting highlighted areas of mutual agreement between the two nations.

Germany appreciated Nepal's stance regarding the invasion of Ukrainian territory by the Russian government, its pledge to democracy, social inclusion and the peace process. Soon after the Russian invasion in 2022, Nepal opposed Moscow's move.

Germany and Nepal signed a Financial and Technical Cooperation Agreement this year, with a grant totalling 56 million euros. The assistance will be used in the areas of renewable energy, energy infrastructure, gender equality, maternal care and childcare, quality infrastructure for sustainable economic development, health, and local and provincial economic development.

The meeting ended with pledges from both governments to increase cooperation, find areas of mutual benefits and continue to build a strong partnership.

Nepal and Germany established diplomatic relations in 1958. "Despite the geographical distance, our friendship is strong through shared values of democracy, inclusion, and equality," Ambassador Kurzweil said.

Germany has been a true friend of Nepal, Dhakal responded. The Nepali people appreciated their unwavering support, particularly during the 2015 earthquakes and the Covid-19 pandemic, he added.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 29-3-2024

Exports of high-value Nepali products rise 5 percent

The export earnings from goods identified by NTIS 2023 totalled Rs65.68 billion in the first eight months of the current fiscal year.

Post Report

KATHMANDU, Nepal's export of high-value products increased by 4.85 percent in the first eight months of the current fiscal year due to a rise in the shipment of iron and steel products, cement, ginger, readymade garment and medicinal herbs.

According to the Department of Customs, export earnings from goods identified by the Nepal Trade Integration Strategy (NTIS) 2023 totalled Rs65.68 billion in the review period, out of Nepal's Rs100.61 billion exports.

Nepal reviewed the NTIS basket in the current fiscal year, adding 20 products and services to the list.

According to Trade and Export Promotion Center statistics, the export of iron and steel jumped by 74.4 percent to Rs11.63 billion during the review period. Iron and steel comprised the highest share of the export at 11.57 percent.

Nepal's cement export totalled Rs1.28 billion in the first eight months of the current fiscal year, up from Rs111.42 million in the same period last fiscal year.

The export of ginger sharply increased by 39.9 percent to Rs1.03 billion during the review period.

Readymade garment exports increased by 15.9 percent to Rs6.18 billion in the first eight months of the current fiscal year.

The export of medicinal herbs increased by 38.7 percent to Rs1.61 billion during the review period. The export of noodles, footwear, dog chew, lentils, vegetables, coffee and honey also increased during the review period. Dog chew export increased by 2.8 percent to Rs1.98 billion in the first eight months of the current fiscal year.

Noodles and pasta exports rose by 10.1 percent to Rs1.33 billion during the review period. Similarly, footwear exports increased by 1.6 percent to Rs814.86 million.

Likewise, lentils export increased by 21.3 percent to Rs353.28 million.

Nepal exported vegetables worth Rs566.83 million, coffee worth Rs42.99 million and honey worth Rs27.87 million in the first eight months of the current fiscal year.

However, the export of yarns, woollen carpet, jute and its products, cardamom, felt, tea, pashmina, fabrics, rosin and resin acid, Nepali paper, gold and silver

jewellery and textiles declined in the first eight months of the current fiscal year.

The export of yarns declined by 4.1 percent to Rs7.51 billion during the review period.

Woollen carpet export declined by 6.2 percent to Rs6.92 billion in the first eight months of the current fiscal year. The export of jute and its products declined by 7 percent to Rs4.97 billion during the review period.

Cardamom export declined by 11.8 percent to Rs5.17 billion in the first eight months of the current fiscal year.

Similarly, felt product exports declined by Rs3.08 billion during the review period. Tea exports also declined by 11.9 percent to Rs2.46 billion in the first eight months of the current fiscal year.

Pashmina export declined by 4.1 percent to Rs2.02 billion in the first eight months of the current fiscal year. The export of fabrics also fell by 2.7 percent to Rs1.66 billion in the first eight months of the current fiscal year.

Rosin and resin acid export sharply declined by 29.6 percent to Rs800.50 million during the review period.

The export of Nepali paper also shrunk by 2.4 percent to Rs742.54 million in the review period.

Export of silver jewellery declined by 15.1 percent to Rs113.01 million while gold jewellery fell by 75.2 percent to Rs27.27 million. The export of textiles declined by 38.70 percent to Rs3.31 billion during the review period. Government officials said that in the context of the planned graduation of Nepal from the least developed countries (LDCs) category by 2026, it has launched schemes to boost exports.

According to the government estimates, it would require Rs463 billion of investment to implement the new trade integration strategy. The major target of NTIS 2023 is to attain Nepal's trade-to-GDP ratio of 55 percent by 2026 from 43.81 percent in 2021.

Gajendra Kumar Thakur, joint secretary of the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies, said that the ministry has allocated a budget amounting to Rs30.99 million for the current fiscal year for the implementation of NTIS 2023.

The Industry Ministry is a coordination unit and needs integrated support from the Finance Ministry, Agriculture, Nepal Bureau of Standards and Metrology, Forest Ministry and other relevant ministries and government bodies for the successful implementation of the new trade strategy, Thakur said.

"Most of our exportable goods are being returned from the border in the lack of labs. If labs are established at border points and international accreditation is obtained for them, this will boost exports further," Thakur said. "It will also help in the quality test for goods imported from neighbouring and third countries," he said.

Integrated initiatives are being taken to boost exports, he said.

The Industry Ministry has also formed the National Programme Implementation Unit under the chair of Industry Minister Damodar Bhandari.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 18-3-2024

Iran, Tajikistan to cooperate in making hydraulic model of Roghun Diversion Dam

TEHRAN - Water officials from Iran and Tajikistan will cooperate in making the hydraulic model of the Roghun Diversion Dam, IRNA reported.

An expert-level meeting was held with the participation of the representatives from the ministries of Energy, Foreign Affairs, Transport and Urban Development, Sports and Youth Affairs, as well as the Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) under the framework of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) inked at the 16th Iran-Tajikistan Joint Economic Cooperation Commission.

During the expert meetings, the participants presented suggestions for the expansion of cooperation between Iran and Tajikistan in various fields, including the dispatching of the representatives of the Water Research Institute to Tajikistan for the provision of the hydraulic model of Roghun Diversion Dam and Water Intake Tunnel.

Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe hosted the 16th meeting of Iran-Tajikistan Joint Economic Committee on December 27 and 28, 2023.

The documents and MOUs in the committee meeting were signed by Iranian Energy Minister Ali-Akbar Mehrabian and Tajikistan Energy and Water Resources Minister Daler Juma who co-chaired the two countries' Joint Economic Committee.

Speaking in that event, Mehrabian said the trade between Iran and Tajikistan has increased by 10 times over the past two years.

According to the official, the value of trade between the two countries which was \$23 million in the Iranian calendar year 1399 (2020-2021) reached \$280 million in the previous Iranian calendar year (ended on March 20, 2023).

"During the previous visit of President Raisi to Tajikistan, the two countries had set a \$500 million target for the trade between the two sides, and now considering the current trend of relations, a much higher goal can be set," Mehrabian said.

Earlier in November 2023, Iran and Tajikistan also signed a joint statement and 18 cooperation documents and MOUs to deepen bilateral strategic relations.

The joint statement was signed between President Raisi and his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rahmon in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe.

The documents and MOUs were inked by the Iranian and Tajik ministers in the presence of the two presidents. - **EF**

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 16-3-2024**Tehran, Baghdad negotiating gas swap from Turkmenistan**

TEHRAN - The Iraqi Minister of Electricity says Baghdad is negotiating with Tehran to use Iran's wide and nationwide lines to transport Turkmenistan's gas

Referring to the challenge in connecting lines transporting gas from Turkmenistan to Iraq only through the Iranian network, he explained, "We are negotiating with the Iranian side to use their network to transport these quantities, as these 20 million from Turkmenistan will provide continuous Turkmenistan next summer," according to Iraqi press.

He added that "the agreement with Iran, which has been in place for years, provides for supplying Iraq with 51 million M3 per day, and this amount covers our need if the flow is stabilized by them, and the 20 million M3 from Turkmenistan can be used when reducing the flow from the Iranian side".

He pointed out that "the Ministry of Electricity paid all gas dues to the Iranian side and downloaded them to a special account at the Iraqi Trade Bank, but due to international sanctions, the payment process was not completed and now the gas is being exchanged for Iraqi black oil according to an agreement that was made and is being carried out smoothly".

" the Iranian side has reduced the quantities of gas flowing in winter, especially in the last two months, and it was not possible due to the cold weather and the internal need for double quantities, as well as the maintenance of pipelines ", adding that "the ministry hopes for the return of natural flows with the entry of the holy month of Ramadan, which will result in a clear improvement in processing hours," the official said.

Iran has already reached a similar agreement with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to swap gas through its territory.

The agreement between Iran, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan on a natural gas swap deal for up to two billion cubic meters of Turkmen gas took effect as of January 1, 2022.

Later in June 2022, Iran inked a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Azerbaijan to double the amount of natural gas the country was going to swap with Turkmenistan.

The MOU was signed by Iranian Oil Minister Javad Oji and Azerbaijan's Economy Minister Mikayil Chingiz Oghlu Jabbarov on Friday.

Speaking to the press on the sidelines of a visit to Azerbaijan, Oji underlined the expansion of relations with Azerbaijan, saying: "The gas swap contract [that the two countries have signed recently] has provided the ground for cooperation in other sectors including transportation, power, trade and such areas."

EF/

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 17-3-2024**Tehran, Kabul sign MOU on agricultural cooperation**

TEHRAN - Officials from Iran and the government of Afghanistan signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for cooperation in agricultural sectors.

The MOU was signed during a visit of a delegation from Iran's Ministry of Agriculture to Kabul.

The document entails cooperation between the two neighbors in a range of fields, including plant protection, agricultural research, soil sciences, alternatives to poppy cultivation, irrigation, agricultural infrastructures, animal husbandry, veterinary medicine, and support for the private sectors.

Back in November 2023, Iran and Afghanistan signed five other MOUs on cooperation in different economic sectors.

The MOUs were signed in a ceremony in the presence of Iranian Agriculture Minister Mohammad-Ali Nikbakht, President Raisi's special envoy for Afghanistan Hassan Kazemi Qomi, and Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs of the Taliban Government Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

The mentioned MOUs included the cooperation document of the Iran-Afghanistan Joint Economic Committee meeting, the document of the two sides' Joint International Road Transport Cooperation Committee meeting, the MOU between Iran's Civil Aviation Organization (CAO) and the Afghan side, the MOU between Iran's Esfahan Steel Company and the Afghan side, and the MOU between Iran's Secretariat of Free Trade and Special Economic Zones and the Afghan sides.

Led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a 30-member delegation from Afghanistan visited Iran in early November 2023 when Iran's capital Tehran hosted an Iran-Afghanistan Joint Economic Committee meeting for the first time after the new government in Afghanistan took office.

The Iranian and Afghan representatives to the Joint Economic Committee held the first day of their meeting, with high-ranking economic officials of both countries being in attendance.

The formation of joint working groups in fields such as trade, transit, transportation, customs, and the environment were discussed on the first day of the two-day meeting.

The two sides also agreed on the formation of several more working groups tasked with identifying problems in the way of economic cooperation between the two neighbors.

EF/

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 21-3-2024

Why do reforms elude Pakistan?

Fiscal deficit, however, becomes a problem, and a serious one if it's persistently high, when, as in the case of Pakistan

By Hussain H Zaidi

At the start of every political cycle, the new government is confronted with the choice between letting the economy move on the beaten track and introducing some fundamental changes to economic management.

Every government, at least on the face of it, chooses the latter alternative. But it soon realizes that the reforms will entail considerable political cost and had better be put off. With discretion becoming the better part of valour, it is business as usual for economic managers.

Why has shaking off the beaten track remained a tall order? To answer this question, let's look at the two perennial economic problems: the fiscal and trade deficits.

In itself, the fiscal deficit isn't a vice. In fact, in the face of slow or falling economic growth, it becomes both necessary and desirable: the government needs to step up its spending at a time of sluggish economic activity thus leading to falling or stagnant tax revenue.

Fiscal deficit, however, becomes a problem, and a serious one if it's persistently high, when, as in the case of Pakistan, it is undergirded by structural rather than cyclic factors. The structural issues are on both the expenditure and revenue sides.

It is customary to categorize public spending as induced and autonomous. The former alters with, while the latter is independent of, the changes in national income or output level. Autonomous expenditures have to be incurred regardless of whether the economy is moving up or down the growth trajectory.

The policy implication is that the government has little discretion in cutting back on autonomous expenditures. This explains why the cuts in overall expenditure almost always entail a reduction of the induced expenditure, such as development spending.

Autonomous expenditures always soak up the lion's share in the total public spending. In the current financial year budget, autonomous expenditure (debt servicing, defence, civil administration, pensions, grants and transfers), accounted for nearly 80 per cent of the total outlays. With a narrow spending discretion available to the government, an uptick in tax revenue is the only viable option to cut back on the fiscal deficit.

Be that as it may, several sectors of the economy remain undertaxed or outside the tax net. The trading sector generates 19 per cent of the total GDP, but its share in total tax revenue is less than 1.0 per cent. Likewise, agriculture makes up one-fifth of the economy, but farm income remains outside the tax net.

The realty sector, professionals, entertainers, and now YouTubers and TikTokers by and large avoid or evade taxes hands down, leaving the salaried class to bear

most of the direct tax burden. One of the first steps towards meaningful economic reforms will be to make all sections of society contribute to the state kitty proportional to their income. But since the undertaxed sectors represent the support base of one major party or another, they remain untouchable.

Fiscal constraints are compounded by tax exemptions or reliefs as well as subsidies, notably for commodities like sugar, whose major beneficiaries are big industrial houses, many owned by politicians across the political spectrum. Such packages not only perpetuate a culture of industrial un-competitiveness but also worsen an already skewed distribution of scarce resources.

A country's trade deficit indicates in essence that it is consuming more than it is producing. The difference is met by borrowing abroad and thus accumulating external debt. Cutting the trade deficit will require either ratcheting up output or ratcheting down consumption.

As Pakistan is the fifth largest country in the world, where more than 64 per cent of the population is under the age of 29 and is growing at a rate of 2.5 per cent per annum (per the 2023 census), cutting back on essential consumption is neither possible nor desirable.

Given the nation's penchant for conspicuous consumption, it will remain difficult to slash non-essential consumption or even wasteful expenditure as well. This leaves a sustained increase in output relative to consumption as the only feasible option.

An increase in output is either demand-pull or supply-push. If the demand for a commodity, such as shirts, rises, businesses will step up production until the output reaches capacity. Should the upswing in demand continue, the only way to satisfy it will be to import shirts, thus running the trade deficit.

The credible and long-run option is to perk up the output capacity. But this will require either addition to the capital stock (investment) or shoring up the productivity of the existing resources (land, labour or capital).

At 15 per cent, Pakistan's investment-to-GDP ratio is among the lowest in the world. The low investment is underpinned by a host of factors, such as low savings due to both low real incomes and a high national propensity for non-essential consumption, lack of entrepreneurship, barriers to entry for small businesses, macroeconomic instability, and security situation (this is especially applicable to foreign investment).

Both the government and banks have been reluctant to support startups for their risky ventures. Through preferential credit and taxation and simplified incorporation procedures, entrepreneurship needs to be supported.

Not only the size but the type of investment is also important. We need real sector investment, which raises the productive capacity of the economy, and not the quick-yielding speculative investment – in stocks and

plots – in which wealth is not created but only changes hands.

Although it is for individual companies to decide where to put their savings, the government can encourage the desired investment with the right tax and other incentives or disincentives. Such a move, however, will face stiff resistance from the powerful realty sector, which bankrolls many a political party.

In addition, when an increasing number of parcels of land are being diverted from agriculture to housing societies, a significant expansion in national output is difficult to come by, especially because Pakistan's two largest industries – textiles and food – are agro-based. Not only does this diversion need to be halted by law but it may be ensured by a policy that houses serve as a place to live and not a speculative venture.

The quality of output is as important as its scale. Production of sub-standard products, even if it is on a mass scale, cannot provide a secure basis for long-term growth. In Pakistan, quality is widely regarded as the most negotiable feature of goods and services. Likewise, businesses are geared more towards holding wages down than towards racking up the productivity of labour.

Because the domestic industry is heavily protected, it can conveniently sell low-quality products at home at high profits. However, the same enterprises are either shy of entering foreign markets or find it exceedingly tough to compete therein. Not surprisingly, exports account for only 8.0 per cent of the GDP, one of the lowest in the world, compared with imports, whose share in the national output is 16 per cent.

This calls for an effective regulatory and facilitatory framework to protect consumers and encourage the domestic industry to move up the quality curve. Such a move, however, may be resisted by powerful producer lobbies, who prefer a hands-off approach on the part of the government.

Another reason the euphoria for the reforms fizzles out is that the fundamental changes that they will entail are likely to put the brakes on the pace of economic growth for a few years. No elected government would like to leave office with economic stagnation mocking its balance sheet.

People want jobs, which can be generated only when the economy expands. Businesses are keen to sell more, which is possible only when consumers have rising incomes and better job prospects. The creditors, who are looking to get their capital back along with the mark-up, would like the debtor country to jack up its earnings. This situation holds the government back from initiating meaningful reforms.

The writer is an Islamabad-based columnist.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 30-3-2024 **Finance ministry projects inflation at 22.5-23.5 percent for March**

Imran Ali Kundi

Recovery is expected in LSM sector during remaining months of CFY

ISLAMABAD - The ministry of finance has projected that inflation would decline in the range of 22.5-23.5 percent in March 2024 despite the upward revision in petrol prices and the influence of the Ramazan.

Inflation is projected to hover around 22.5-23.5 percent in March 2024. However, there are expectations of a gradual easing further to 21-22 percent in April 2024. In its monthly report, the ministry of finance has noted that inflation outlook is moderate on account of incumbent government's strong resolve of curbing inflationary pressure by instituting enhanced administrative measures. "The government has announced Ramazan Relief Package with increased allocation from earlier Rs 7.5 billion to Rs 12.5 billion. This will provide relief to the masses and cushion the impact of heightened demand during the religious festival". Furthermore, the phenomenon of the high base effect is also contributing to the moderation of inflationary pressures. Additionally, the global context plays a role in shaping inflation dynamics.

In last quarter of FY2024, inflation outlook is predicting a moderate headline inflation on account of favourable domestic and global factors. With improved Rabi 2023-24 outlook as the sowing of wheat is aligned to its target – the agriculture sector will contribute to growth at its potential level. On the back of strong growth in agriculture, a recovery is also expected in LSM sector during the remaining months of CFY. The performance of high frequency indicators is also signaling growth prospects in the ongoing fiscal year. Besides this, external and fiscal sustainability is also contributing to economic revival. Pakistan and IMF have reached a Staff-Level Agreement (SLA) on the final review of \$3 billion SBA to secure a \$1.1b tranche in coming month. However, sustainable economic recovery requires continuation of fiscal consolidation and prudent policy stance, timely and adequate financial inflows to meet gross financing needs and external sector stability.

According to BOP data for February 2024, current account turns to surplus of \$128 million (Deficit of \$ 303 million in Jan, 2024). The key factor for this improvement is a decline in the trade deficit in goods and services that declined by 14.2 percent on MoM basis (\$ 2.2b in Jan 2024 to \$ 1.9b in Feb 2024). Both exports and imports of goods and services declined by 5.8 and 9.1 percent, respectively. Similarly, balance on primary income improved by 36 percent, due to lower primary income debit. However, remittances which may play more instrumental role in current account improvement, decreased by 6.2 percent on MoM basis. For the month of March, it is expected that exports of goods and

services will improve and reach at level around \$ 3.5b due to favorable foreign demand by Pakistan's main exports destinations.

Similarly, imports of goods and services will touch around \$ 5.5b in March 2024. Nonetheless, remittances are expected to improve due to positive seasonal and Ramazan-eid factor. Considering these factors, as well as other components, the current account will remain in sustainable limit. During Jul-Jan FY2024, net federal revenues grew by 57.0 percent to Rs 4379 billion from Rs 2798 billion same period last year. The sharp rise in revenues was fueled by a notable uptick in non-tax collection, which increased by 105 percent to reach Rs 2140 billion against Rs 1046 billion last year. The substantial increase in non-tax collection is attributed to higher receipts from mark up (PSEs & others), dividends, SBP profit, royalties on oil/gas, and petroleum levy.

According to the latest available data, FBR net provisional tax collection maintained its momentum, increasing by 30.0 percent during Jul-Feb FY2024 to reach Rs 5831 billion from Rs 4494 billion last year. The tax collection surpassed its target by Rs 2.7 billion in the first eight months of the current fiscal year. Notably, in February 2024, net collection surged by 29.3 percent YoY, reaching Rs 682 billion compared to Rs 527 billion last year. During Jul-Feb, FY2024, domestic tax collection grew by 32.5 percent, while customs duty increased by 13.0 percent. On the expenditure side, total expenditures increased by 49.0 percent to Rs 7532 billion during Jul-Jan FY2024, up from Rs 5058 billion last year. Within total, current spending rose by 45.0 percent primarily due to a 60 percent increase in markup payments during Jul-Jan FY2024. In contrast, the growth in non-mark-up current expenditures has been recorded at 26 percent. Overall, in the first seven months of the current fiscal year, the fiscal deficit increased to 2.6 percent of GDP (Rs 2721 billion) against 2.3 percent of GDP (Rs 1974 billion) last year. Moreover, the contained primary expenditures helped in improving the primary surplus to Rs 1939 billion during Jul-Jan FY2024 from Rs 945 billion last year.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 25-3-2024

Pak-Afghan transit trade talks to begin today

Dawn Report

ISLAMABAD: A commerce ministry delegation is scheduled to reach Kabul on Monday for talks to remove obstacles in the transit and bilateral trade, Dawn.com reported.

Foreign Office Spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch confirmed that the Pakistani delegation, headed by Commerce Secretary Khurram Agha, will undertake the two-day visit.

Abdul Salam Jawad, spokesman for the Afghan Commerce Ministry, said: "We will take up the issue of a ban on several transit items. Pakistan has banned the import of certain items under the transit agreement."

The talks will be held amid efforts by both sides to normalise relations following Pakistani airstrikes in two Afghan provinces on March 18.

Afghan charge d'affaires Sardar Shakib Ahmad rushed to Kabul to brief officials about his meetings in Islamabad. He met acting Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and briefed him regarding recent developments in the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a deputy foreign ministry spokesman, Hafiz Zia Ahmad Takkal, said.

'10 per cent hike in import duty'

Pak-Afghan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry's (PAJCCI) Khan Jan Alkozai mentioned a 10 per cent hike in import duty on Afghan transit trade introduced in October last year.

"More problems for Afghan importers were created during the caretaker government in Pakistan," Mr Alkozai told Dawn.com from Kabul.

He said transit via Pakistan has decreased and Afghan importers moved their business to ports in Iran.

PAJCCI Coordinator Ziaul Haq Sarhadi recalled that in October the Ministry of Commerce, through issuing SRO 1380, imposed a ban on 14 items of Afghan Transit Trade which in a larger context constitute around 212 items, besides the enforcement of 100 pc bank guarantee.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 19-3-2024

China, Pakistan to deepen coop in realms of culture, media

INP

ISLAMABAD - Pakistani Ambassador to China Khalil Hashimi embarked on a significant visit to the School of Journalism at Tsinghua University, marking the inauguration of the new Pakistan Culture and Communication Studies office and agreeing to boost cooperation between the two neighbourly countries.

This pivotal moment aimed to deepen the ties between China and Pakistan, particularly in the realms of media and culture.

During the visit, Ambassador Hashimi engaged in discussions about potential initiatives to bolster cooperation between the School of Journalism and the Pakistan Embassy, Gwadar Pro reported.

These initiatives are envisioned to solidify the already strong bond between the two nations.

A notable outcome of these discussions was the announcement of a collaborative effort between the School of Journalism at Tsinghua University, the Pakistan Center for Culture and Communication Studies, Quaid-e-Azam University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and Communication University of China.

Together, they will organize a transformative "China-Pakistan Cultural Corridor Caravan Class" set to take place over three weeks during the upcoming summer.

This innovative caravan class will traverse the landscapes of the Karakoram and Hindu Kush Mountains.

Participants will engage in research, teaching, and writing activities inspired by the ancient journeys of Chinese monks in the mountains of northern Pakistan, as well as the historical route of Gao Xianzhi's expedition across the Hindukush.

Ten esteemed professors from both China and Pakistan will deliver enlightening lectures to students from both countries, fostering cross-cultural understanding and academic collaboration.

Before the unveiling ceremony of the new office, Ambassador Hashimi had a significant meeting with Peng Gang, the Vice President of Tsinghua University.

During this meeting, Ambassador Hashimi commended the university for its exceptional educational standards, recognizing its prestigious rankings in Asia and the global academic landscape.

In an official statement issued following the meeting, it was highlighted that Ambassador Hashimi expressed gratitude to Vice President Peng Gang for Tsinghua University's consistent efforts in enhancing China-Pakistan relations.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 19-3-2024

China's economy starts off the year on strong note, projecting great confidence in trajectory toward 5% GDP goal this year

By Li Xuanmin and Ma Jingjing

China's economy starts off 2024 on strong footing, with an array of key indicators in the first two months beating market expectation by a wide margin, fueled by a spending spree in the Spring Festival holidays, ramped-up efforts in building new quality productive forces and the effects of macro policies implementation. Observers said the upbeat data offer an encouraging sign that the world's second-largest economy is not only consolidating the recovery momentum but also picking up pace.

The industrial output grew 7 percent year-on-year in the first two months, according to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on Monday, well above the 5 percent forecast from analysts polled by Reuters. It is also the fastest since March 2023.

The strong start in 2024, which presages a raft of bright spots ranging from high-tech to consumption of this year's growth path, also rebuts squarely recent skepticism and badmouths on Chinese economy hyped by certain Western media. It projects great confidence in China's economic trajectory toward a growth rate of around 5 percent in 2024, a goal set by this year's Government Work Report that Chinese officials believe

- albeit faced with external and internal headwinds - will come to fruition "with earnest endeavors."

In January-February period, retail sales expanded 5.5 percent from the same period last year, versus a Reuters forecast of 5.2 percent, while fixed-asset investment also gained 4.2 percent in year-on-year terms, surpassing market estimates of 3.2 percent.

"With the macro policies taking effect, China's national economy has continued to recover and turn for the better in the first two months," NBS spokesperson Liu Aihua said at a press briefing of the State Council Information Office on Monday.

Recovery momentum

"The positive macro-economic indicators reflect that the country's GDP growth rate in the first quarter of this year will be higher than 5 percent, and that the economy is bottoming out after facing constant growth pressure seen in the past 10 years or so," Cao Heping, an economist at Peking University, told the Global Times on Monday.

For the first time in a number of consecutive months, the overall gauges on industrial, service and investment all topped the forecasts and displayed a considerable level of gains. And those headline indexes point to a strengthening recovery momentum that is buoyed by restorative growth and, more importantly, multiple new positive factors beyond, according to analysts.

For example, the 5.5-percent jump in the retail sales in the first two months, which though seem to be a moderate number taking account of last year's high base effect, shed light on the indigenous vigor and potential of China's massive consumer market, particularly in entertainment, tourism, cultural, sports and vehicle categories.

During the eight-day Spring Festival holidays in February, nationwide domestic tourism reached 474 million trips, an increase of 19 percent compared with pre-COVID level in 2019, while total expenditure amounted to 632.7 billion yuan, up 7.7 percent from the same holiday period in 2019.

It is forecasted the spending boost will prevail throughout the year, as more stimulus policies take effect and the "pandemic-scarring effect" continues to diminish. China last week unveiled a plan to promote large-scale renewal of equipment and the trading-in of consumer goods, opening up a market worth trillions of yuan and further giving consumption a leg up.

Tian Yun, a veteran economist based in Beijing, told the Global Times on Monday the economic recovery has also shown signs of tilting toward a more "even and balance" mode at the beginning of the year, especially in the demand side, whose recovery - though still lags behind the supply side - has been in a quick catch-up.

Fixed-asset investment, which grew 4.2-percent in the first two months, has "bottomed out" despite a drag by property sector, according to Tian, while ascribing the

turnaround partly to the issuance of additional 1-trillion-yuan special treasury bonds in the fourth quarter.

In January-February period, investment in high-tech industries rose 9.4 percent year-on-year, a drastic rise that aligns with this year's economic blueprint laid out during the two sessions, which put the development of new quality productive forces as a core mission.

To reinforce and fast track the recovery in the demand side, Tian suggested that Chinese policymakers to "frontload" part of special-purpose bonds in the first half of 2024.

The Government Work Report stated that China plans to issue ultra-long special treasury bonds starting this year and over each of the next several years. One trillion yuan (\$139 billion) of such bonds will be issued in 2024.

In 2023, fixed-asset investment staged a growth of 3 percent, NBS data showed.

In terms of supply, Liu Aihua said at the press briefing that industrial production will continue to play a ballast role in the national economy. She highlighted new drives from China's elevating innovation capacity amid manufacturing upgrade and transformation, in addition to traditional edges such as a complete industrial chain as well as the sheer size of the market.

Confidence behind the target

Following the set-up of an annual GDP growth target in early March, Chinese doomsayers have been gone to great lengths to raise doubts on the likelihood of the country to achieve a 5-percent goal. So the highly-anticipated economic data at the start of the year also timely draws out an objective and comprehensive picture on China's economic course, proving that the country is running on abundant engines - which certain Western media outlets ignore, that arguably outweigh unfavorable conditions, analysts said.

While acknowledging a bunch of downward pressures including "complex, severe and uncertain external environment and insufficient domestic effective demand," Liu stressed that China has conditions and enough support to hit the around 5-percent GDP growth target, and will realize the goal "through earnest endeavors."

Liu said Chinese authorities attach great importance to the challenges that could pose barriers to development. They also stand with great confidence and maintain strategic focus to cope with difficulties, promote sustained economic recovery, and translate the expected economic development goals into reality.

Han Baojiang, a professor at Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, told the Global Times that Chinese policymakers are sober and they have articulated clear approach to economic development. "As long as we improve our economy, enhance people's livelihoods, and ensure employment, it is probably the most effective way to deal with all challenges."

Cao also voiced full confidence that the country will realize this year's GDP growth target of around 5 percent, though he said more effort is needed to focus on high-quality development.

To shield against potential headwinds, Cao suggested that authorities should continue to promote the transition in overall economic structure, focus on developing new quality productive forces, like new industries to be propelled by artificial intelligence.

Analysts warned against the property downturn, which they said is likely to persist for some time this year. In the first two months, China's property investment dived 9 percent year-on-year, NBS data showed.

Also, the increasingly volatile external environment calls for Chinese policymakers to reach more into the toolbox to stabilize and shore up internal demand, according to Tian. Liu said the country's solid economic fundamentals, the accumulation of many positive factors and the government's stimulus measures will continue to propel the economy to rebound and improve.

Tian predicted that China will continue making an "immense" 30 percent contribution to the world economy on condition that the 5-percent GDP growth goal is achieved, making it the second-largest only after the US.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 21-3-2024

China's pro-foreign investment measures boost market appeal

BEIJING, (Xinhua) -- China has announced a new set of measures aimed at enhancing the appeal and effective utilization of foreign investment, as part of the country's efforts to harness and share its huge market potential.

An action plan comprising 24 specific pro-foreign investment measures was unveiled Tuesday by the State Council, China's cabinet, with targeted measures to expand market access, enhance appeal to foreign investment, foster a level playing field, facilitate the flow of innovation factors, as well as better align domestic rules with high-standard international economic and trade rules.

The country will shorten its negative list for foreign investment reasonably, and launch pilot programs to relax foreign entry thresholds in scientific and technological innovation, according to the action plan.

China will also expand access for foreign financial institutions to the banking and insurance sector and increase the scope of their participation in the domestic bond market.

Last year, the State Council also introduced a raft of measures to optimize the investment environment for overseas firms. A recent evaluation of the measures showed that over 60 percent of the policies have been implemented or achieved notable progress, with more than 90 percent of the surveyed foreign firms giving a positive review.

The launch of the new policy package to attract foreign investment came after the foreign direct investment in the Chinese mainland in actual use dropped 8 percent year on year in yuan terms.

Wu Hao, secretary general of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), China's top economic planner, said fluctuations in cross-border investment are natural, noting that China still enjoys significant advantages and broad space for attracting foreign investment.

"China is a super-large market with the greatest growth potential in the world, and will continue to unleash huge demand in advanced manufacturing, new urbanization and consumption upgrading," Wu said.

Official data showed that in January, 4,588 new foreign-invested firms were established across the country, up 74.4 percent year on year.

"The Chinese market is too huge to be missed, and we are always upbeat on the vitality of China's development," said Henry Tan, vice chairman and CEO of Luen Thai Group.

The Chinese business of global sportswear brand Skechers, run by Luen Thai Group, saw double-digit sales growth in 2023, with its retail outlets exceeding 3,500 across the country.

"We will continue to up our investment in China this year," Tan said. Skechers plans to open 550 new outlets in China this year.

Dr. Holger Scherr, president and CEO of Beijing Foton Daimler Automotive Co. Ltd., and head of the Mercedes-Benz business unit, said the company remains optimistic about China's economic growth despite global economic uncertainties.

"In the long term, the substantial market capacity, demand for high-end heavy-duty truck products, and technological innovation will provide us with enduring market opportunities," he said.

According to Fan Yuelong, director in charge of brand and marketing at Deloitte China, abundant opportunities remain for foreign firms to capitalize on in China due to the uneven regional development.

The central and western regions and northeast of China enjoy an improving development environment with abundant resources, a broad market and sufficient talents, said Hua Zhong, director of the NDRC's foreign capital and overseas investment department.

China has started revising the industry catalog of sectors encouraging foreign investment, and the revision of the sub-catalog for the central and western regions will increase support for basic manufacturing, applicable technologies and consumption related to people's livelihood in light of local conditions, according to Hua.

"We welcome global multinational companies to pay more attention to these regions and expand their business presence there," Hua said.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 19-3-2024

China ready to work with New Zealand to actively implement upgraded FTA: Chinese FM

WELLINGTON, March 19 (Xinhua) -- China is ready to work with New Zealand to actively implement the upgraded version of the China-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA), Visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said here on Monday.

The two sides should launch negotiations on the negative list of service trade as soon as possible, so as to push bilateral cooperation to a new level, Wang said while meeting with New Zealand Trade Minister Todd McClay.

Wang, who is also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, has been on a tour from March 17 to March 21 for an official visit to New Zealand and to Australia.

Wang said openness brings progress, while seclusion leads to backwardness. China's door to the world will open even wider, and its door to New Zealand will always be open.

Both sides should jointly safeguard free trade, oppose unilateralism and protectionism in the name of "de-risking," build an open world economy, and provide a good business environment for enterprises of the two countries, he said.

The Chinese foreign minister said China-New Zealand relations maintain a leading position among China's relations with developed countries, which is the important and unique value of this bilateral relationship.

For his part, McClay said since the establishment of diplomatic ties between New Zealand and China, the bilateral cooperation has achieved fruitful results and brought important benefits to the two peoples.

New Zealand is willing to work with China to further expand cooperation in economy, trade and other fields and facilitate personnel exchanges, McClay said.

In the face of increasing trade barriers and uncertainties in the world, the upgraded China-New Zealand FTA is an important example, he said, adding that the two sides should work together to uphold the principle of free trade and resist various protectionism and unilateral actions.

On Monday, Wang also met with New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Winston Peters.

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THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 16-3-2024

Army to base 6 Apache attack helicopters in Jodhpur

HT Correspondent

The army ordered the AH64E Apache attack helicopters from the US for more than 4,100 crore in 2020

NEW DELHI: The Indian Army will base its six new AH64E Apache attack helicopters at Jodhpur in Rajasthan to further strengthen its posture against Pakistan, officials aware of the development said on Friday.

The army ordered these helicopters from the US for more than 4,100 crore in 2020. Boeing is producing the helicopters at its Mesa facility in Arizona. The delivery of the Apaches, to be operated by the Army Aviation Corps, is expected to begin in May, the officials said, asking not to be named. The Army Aviation Corps is modernising its capabilities with attack helicopters, light combat helicopters (LCH), light utility helicopters (LUH) and unmanned aerial vehicles.

Armed with fire-and-forget Hellfire missiles, the Apache can track up to 128 targets a minute and prioritise threats. The missiles equip the gunships with heavy anti-armour capabilities.

The Indian Air Force operates a fleet of 22 such helicopters.

India placed orders worth \$ 3.1 billion for 22 Apache helicopters and 15 Chinook heavy-lift choppers for IAF in 2015. IAF has inducted all the Boeing-made helicopters, and both platforms have operated extensively in Ladakh amid the ongoing military standoff with China along the contested Line of Actual Control (LAC).

The army plans to buy a mix of 200 utility and combat helicopters to meet its operational requirements, with the platforms set to be produced in the country. Last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the country's largest helicopter manufacturing facility at Tumakuru in Karnataka, in what is being seen as a shot in the arm for Atmanirbharta or self-reliance in the defence manufacturing sector. The new HAL factory, spread across 615 acres, will initially produce the LUH followed by LCH and later the Indian multirole helicopters. The Indian Army will start phasing out its ageing Cheetah and Chetak helicopters in three to four years, with the entire fleet set to be replaced with new utility choppers over the next 10 years.

The army currently has three aviation brigades and there are plans to raise more, as previously reported by HT.

It will also induct in the next three to four years the MQ-9B remotely piloted aircraft systems to be imported from the US. The acquisition of these drones, in a

government-to-government deal, will significantly boost the Indian military's strength as the versatile platform has the capability to strike targets with its on-board weapons, it can carry out intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; and its other roles include electronic warfare, defensive counter air and airborne early warning.

India is pursuing a deal to buy 31 such drones --- 15 for the navy, and eight each for the army and IAF.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 19-3-2024

Rajnath, Austin hold talks

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh today had a telephonic conversation with US counterpart Lloyd Austin. Both briefly discussed a range of bilateral, regional security and defence cooperation issues. They reviewed the recent bilateral events such as the 'INDUS-X' Summit held in New Delhi in February and the bilateral tri-service exercise 'Tiger Triumph', which commenced in India today.

"The US Secretary of Defense appreciated the important role being played by the Indian Navy in conducting anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean Region," a statement of the Indian Ministry of Defence said today. The two ministers discussed ways and means to implement the India-US Defence Cooperation Roadmap, which was concluded last year. Other defence industrial cooperation issues such as repair of US naval ships in Indian shipyards were also briefly discussed. Both ministers had last met in New Delhi in November 2023 during the India-US Ministerial 2+2 Dialogue.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 16-3-2024

Defence ministry, HAL ink 2,890 cr deal to upgrade navy's 25 Dornier aircraft

HT Correspondent

The defence ministry in March last year signed a 667-crore contract with HAL for six Dornier-228 aircraft

New Delhi: The defence ministry on Friday signed a Rs.2,890 crore contract with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited for the midlife upgrade (MLU) of the navy's 25 Dornier aircraft and associated equipment.

The upgrade will significantly enhance the operational capability of the Dornier aircraft of the Indian Navy to perform primary roles of maritime surveillance, electronic intelligence and boosting maritime domain awareness, the defence ministry said in a statement.

The upgrade will involve fitting the Dorniers with modern avionics and sensors. The project will generate

employment of 180,000 man-days over a span of six and a half years, said the ministry.

On March 1, the defence ministry signed five contracts worth Rs.39,125 crore for BrahMos missiles, ship-borne Brahmos systems, close-in weapon systems, high-power radars, and aero-engines for MiG-29 fighter planes.

One of these was with HAL for RD-33 aero engines for MiG-29 aircraft at a cost of Rs.5,249.72 crore. These aero engines will be produced by the Koraput division of HAL.

The defence ministry in March last year signed a 667-crore contract with HAL for six Dornier-228 aircraft for the Indian Air Force (IAF) to boost its operational capabilities,

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 19-3-2024

AgustaWestland chopper scam: SC dismisses Christian Michel's release petition

Abraham Thomas

The AgustaWestland scam, being probed by the Central Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement Directorate, is estimated to be of about 3,700 crore

The Supreme Court on Monday dismissed a petition filed by AgustaWestland chopper scam accused Christian James Michel seeking release from jail claiming that he has already spent five years in jail, the maximum punishment under the offences for which he was extradited in 2018, and with the trial of the case yet to begin.

“How can you file a writ petition under Article 32 of the Constitution,” a bench headed by chief justice of India (CJI) Dhananjaya Y Chandrachud, said while refusing to entertain the petition.

Appearing for Michel, advocate Aljo K Joseph told the court that his release application was rejected by the trial court on February 23 based on a top court judgment of February 7, 2023 that said Michel was not entitled to mandatory release as an undertrial on completion of maximum sentence as the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), subsequent to his extradition, filed an additional chargesheet accusing him under Section 467 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which carries a maximum punishment of life term for forgery of any valuable document.

“You are aggrieved by this finding against you. According to you, we are wrong that Section 471 cannot be added. We have dealt with that in our order. You file a challenge to that order. But how do you come under Article 32?” observed the bench, also comprising justices JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra.

In his petition before the top court, Michel said, “The liberty granted under the Constitution of India to the petitioner has been curtailed and he is illegally detained in custody after completing the maximum sentence.”

It was further stated that as on December 5, 2023, Michel has spent five years in prison for offences pertaining to deception and cheating under sections 415 and 420. He was extradited based on these charges from Dubai on December 4, 2018.

However, it was only later that the CBI added Section 467 of IPC against him by way of supplementary chargesheets filed in September 2020 and March 2022.

The AgustaWestland scam, being probed also by the Enforcement Directorate (ED), is estimated to be of about 3,700 crore. Michel, a British national, was accused of being the alleged middleman in the deal and was charged along with other accused under Section 8 of the Prevention of Corruption Act.

The trial in the case is yet to begin even as the ED and CBI have opposed his bail claiming him to be a “flight risk” and a person with “deep nexus and influence” in the bureaucracy.

The CBI told the top court in an earlier hearing that he is a “key link to unearth the modus operandi as there is ample evidence to link him with the commission of grave economic offence”.

The CBI has so far named former defence secretary Shashi Kant Sharma and four Indian Air Force (IAF) officers for allegedly favouring the firm in the controversial deal signed in 2010. Michel was named by the CBI in its September 2017 chargesheet, while the ED initiated probe into the money trail following the payment of kickbacks in the deal.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 16-3-2024

Agni 5 missile to fast-breeder reactor: India's message to world

Shishir Gupta

PM Modi, as a 'shanti doot' and a 'shakti doot' conveyed a message that India loves peace but also can fight with arms developed in India.

In March, India carried out four important events linked to national security which also carried a message of Narendra Modi-led central government to the world.

With the successful test firing of the Agni-5 missile or the core loading of the fast breeder reactor at Tamil Nadu's Kalpakkam, India has showcased its ability to demonstrate top-level technologies as well as make sure that its national security is not compromised in any way.

The core loading of the fast breeder reactor prototype of 50 megawatts is something which people may have dismissed considering as a routine exercise. However, it

is important to note that the reactor ensures that India has an ample supply of plutonium, which can be used for energy and military purposes. Further, it has been fed into the system through the mixed oxide fuel and it ensures that it plugs the gap which has occurred because of lower availability of uranium in the country. This is part of a three-stage nuclear cycle and signifies that India does not need help from a third country to have plutonium for power generation and for military applications. Besides India, only France and Russia have fast-breeding reactors at present.

The test firing of the Agni 5 fire missile which had three multiple independently re-entry vehicles, was done on March 11 with notam issued on March 7. The moment the notam was issued, the Chinese moved their surveillance ship to track the missile. The Agni 5 missile is capable of firing three warheads simultaneously with different velocities to evade the ballistic missile defense of the adversary.

Interestingly, Pakistan tried the launch of MIRV missiles three years ago but failed miserably as the three warheads actually fell within a vicinity of 2 km. However, India has the capacity to launch three warheads simultaneously within vicinity of 150 to 200 km range.

The Agni 5 missile is actually part of the nuclear triad and it is a step towards building a minimum credible deterrent for India. Today, the country has submarine launched ballistic missiles through its submarines, air launch capability and hence the basic foundations of a nuclear triad are more or less complete.

The MIRV-equipped missiles are part of a natural progression of a nuclear weapon state, which India declared itself through the Shakti Pokhran test in 1999. More test firings, more operationalisation of Agni 5 and then its induction into the land forces will ensure that nobody has expansionist plans for India and nobody casts an evil eye on India.

With these developments, India's nuclear neighbours, Pakistan and China, realised that it cannot be treated lightly any longer. China got the lesson way back in 2017 when India stopped China from occupying the Doklam plateau, while Pakistan learned this lesson during the 2019 Balakot airstrike. When Pakistan captured wing commander Abhinandan and tried to brutalise him, PM Modi sent a message through RAW chief to then DG ISI Asim Munir, currently the chief of Pak army staff, saying that we have not got the missile for Diwali. If anything happens to Abinandan, then there will be serious consequences, and at that very moment, Prithvi nuclear missiles were moved to Rajasthan. As a result, the next day, then Pak PM Imran

Khan announced in the national assembly that they would release the wing commander.

Another development which drew the attention was visiting Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad, followed by visiting Pokhran's Bharat Shakti exercises. PM Modi, as a 'shanti doot' and a 'shakti doot' conveyed the message that India loves peace but also has the capability to fight a conflict indigenously.

With these developments, China realised that it has to change its nuclear strategy towards India while Pakistan would now start leaning towards China all the more.

India with these military exercises sent a global message that Japan can no longer sit on the fence and look towards both India and China; European nations have to sort out their own internal conflicts before they start to cast aspersion on India on various issues including human rights.

It also delivered a message to the regional powers and the neighbours who particularly always played the China card against India including those who have recently decided that they want to go the China way that these developments are going to ensure that nobody can take India casually and India's voice must be heard on the global table.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 18-3-2024

Army troops of India, Seychelles all set for 10-day mega exercise

PTI

New Delhi, The Indian Army will carry out a 10-day mega war game with troops of Seychelles at a military facility in the island nation to boost "collaborative partnership" against the backdrop of common concerns over China's growing muscle-flexing in the Indian Ocean.

Both sides will jointly train, plan and execute a series of well-developed tactical drills, the Army said on Sunday.

The Seychelles is a strategically located archipelago of around 115 islands in the Indian Ocean region and India has been focusing on significantly ramping up defence cooperation with the country.

An Indian Army contingent comprising 45 personnel, which will participate in the exercise 'Lamitiye', departed for Seychelles on Sunday. An equal number of troops from the Seychelles Defence Forces (SDF) will join the exercise.

"The exercise will contribute immensely in developing mutual understanding and magnify jointness between the troops of both the armies. It will also foster collaborative partnership and help in sharing best practices between the two sides," the Army said in a readout. It said the aim of the exercise is to enhance

interoperability in sub-conventional operations in semi-urban environments under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter on peacekeeping operations.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 19-3-2024

India, US kick off tri-services' war games in Visakhapatnam

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, India and the US today kicked off a two-week tri-services' exercise. Contingents of all three armed forces will be participate in the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) exercise "Tiger Triumph-24", said the Ministry of Defence.

US naval assets have arrived in Visakhapatnam.

The exercise will have two phases — harbour phase and sea phase. The harbour phase, between March 18 and 25, will discuss tactics and scenarios, while the sea phase, to be held from March 25 to 31, will have full-scale operations.

Indian Navy ships will participate with integral helicopters and landing crafts. Army vehicles and Indian Air Force aircraft and helicopters along with the Rapid Action Medical Team will be participate in the exercise. The US will be represented by navy ships and troops of the Marine Corps and the army. The exercise is aimed at developing interoperability for conducting HADR operations and refine standard operating procedures to enable rapid and smooth coordination between forces of both countries. The sea phase will have the two sides undertake maritime and amphibious operations.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 23-3-2024

ISRO achieves major milestone in reusable launch vehicle tech with landing experiment

The RLV was made to undertake more difficult maneuvers with dispersions, correct both cross-range and downrange and land on the runway in a fully autonomous mode'

PTI, Bengaluru

ISRO on Friday said it has achieved a major milestone in the area of reusable launch vehicle technology through the RLV LEX-02 landing experiment.

This is the second of the series conducted at Aeronautical Test Range, Chitradurga, in Karnataka at 7.10 am.

After the RLV-LEX-01 mission was accomplished last year, RLV-LEX-02 demonstrated the autonomous landing capability of reusable launch vehicle (RLV) from off-nominal initial conditions at release from helicopter, the Bengaluru-headquartered space agency

said in a statement. "The RLV was made to undertake more difficult maneuvers with dispersions, correct both cross-range and downrange and land on the runway in a fully autonomous mode," it said.

The winged vehicle, called Pushpak, was lifted by an Indian Air Force Chinook helicopter and was released from 4.5 km altitude. After release at a distance of 4 km from the runway, Pushpak autonomously approached the runway along with cross-range corrections. It landed precisely on the runway and came to a halt using its brake parachute, landing gear brakes and nose wheel steering system, ISRO said.

It added that this mission successfully simulated the approach and high-speed landing conditions of RLV returning from space.

"With this second mission, ISRO has re-validated the indigenously developed technologies in the areas of navigation, control systems, landing gear and deceleration systems essential for performing a high-speed autonomous landing of a space-returning vehicle," the space agency said.

The winged body and all flight systems used in RLV-LEX-01 were reused in the RLV-LEX-02 mission after due certification/ clearances. Hence, reuse capability of flight hardware and flight systems is also demonstrated in this mission, ISRO said.

Based on the observation from RLV-LEX-01, the airframe structure and landing gear were strengthened to tolerate higher landing loads, it said.

The mission was accomplished by Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) along with the Liquid Propulsion System Centre (LPSC) and the ISRO Inertial Systems Unit (IISU).

ISRO chairman S Somanath congratulated the team for the flawless execution of this complex mission.

On the success of the landing experiment, VSSC Director Dr S Unnikrishnan Nair said through this repeated success, ISRO could master the terminal phase maneuvering, landing and energy management in a fully autonomous mode, which is a critical step towards the future.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 23-3-2024

Isro successfully conducts 2nd landing test of Pushpak in Karnataka

Soumya Pillai

ISRO successfully conducted the second landing test of its RLV, Pushpak, from the Aeronautical Test Range (ATR) in Challakere near Chitradurga in Karnataka.

The Indian Space Research Organization successfully conducted the second landing test of its reusable launch vehicle (RLV), Pushpak, from the Aeronautical Test

Range (ATR) in Challakere near Chitradurga in Karnataka on Friday.

“ISRO nails it again. Pushpak (RLV-TD), the winged vehicle, landed autonomously with precision on the runway after being released from an off-nominal position,” the agency said in a statement.

At 7.10am on Friday, the winged vehicle was lifted by the Chinook helicopter of the Indian Air Force and was released from an altitude of 4.5 km, the statement said.

After release at a distance of 4km from the runway, Pushpak autonomously approached the runway along with cross range corrections. It landed precisely on the runway and came to a halt using its brake parachute, landing gear brakes and nose wheel steering system, it said.

“RLV-LEX-02 demonstrated the autonomous landing capability of RLV from off-nominal initial conditions at release from helicopter. RLV was made to undertake more difficult manoeuvres with dispersions, correct both cross-range and down range and land on the runway in a fully autonomous mode,” the statement read.

RLV-TD (technology demonstrator) is one of the most challenging endeavours of the Indian space agency towards developing essential technologies for a fully reusable launch vehicle to enable low-cost access to space. The configuration of RLV-TD is similar to that of an aircraft and combines the complexity of both launch vehicles and aircraft.

The winged RLV-TD has been configured to act as a flying test bed to evaluate various technologies, including hypersonic flight, autonomous landing and powered cruise flight. In the coming years, this vehicle will be scaled up to become the first stage of India’s reusable two stage orbital launch vehicle.

Isro conducted the first landing experiment, RLV-LEX-01, with a scaled down version of the RLV technology demonstrator (RLV-TD) last year on a Chinook Helicopter of the Indian Air Force.

During the demonstration, once the predetermined pillbox parameters were attained, based on the RLV’s mission management computer command, it was released in mid-air, at a down range of 4.6 km.

The IAF, which conducted the experiment for Isro, also issued a statement.

“Airlifted to an altitude of 4.5 kms, IAF Air Warriors were part of the successful mission. IAF heartily congratulates ISRO on achieving this milestone. IAF will contribute and collaborate in future as well, for many such undertakings,” the IAF statement read.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 22-3-2024

SLAF partners QUBELOTS to enhance Drone capabilities

In a notable and forward-looking move, the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) has initiated a collaborative effort with QubeBots Pvt Ltd to enhance Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) and Drone capabilities.

The signing of a comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding on Tuesday (19) between SLAF Commander Air Marshal Udeni Rajapaksa and QubeBots Pvt Ltd, Eng. CEO Tharindu Suraj, marks the beginning of a partnership focused on Research collaboration on Drone Development at Aeronautical Research and Development Wing (AR & DW) SLAF Station Katukurunda.

This strategic collaboration involves QubeBots providing specialised training sessions on Electronic and Firmware development for UAVs, along with ongoing Technical support. By utilising QubeBots expertise and resources, the SLAF aims to enhance its Drone Development capabilities, driving advancements in Technology and progress within Sri Lanka’s Defence sector.

Additionally, SLAF will benefit from the provision of X-Fly Drone platforms by QubeBots, which hold the distinction of being the first-ever commercial Drone platform designed in Sri Lanka. In return, SLAF commits to integrating these Drones into Research and Development initiatives, using them for Educational and Training purposes.

Furthermore, they will collaborate to address a significant gap in the local Education system by developing an innovative curriculum tailored for schoolchildren and undergraduates.

This curriculum aims to enhance students’ knowledge about the technical aspects of UAVs and Drones.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 18-3-2024

Iran, Syria defense ministers condemn U.S., Israel’s attacks on Damascus

TEHRAN – Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani has underscored the urgent need for immediate action to counter the United States and Israel’s attacks on Syria. During a meeting with Syrian counterpart Ali Mahmoud Abbas on Saturday, Ashtiani cautioned against schemes by the United States and Israel to escalate tensions throughout West Asia. He affirmed Iran’s readiness to leverage its complete capacities to aid Syria in bolstering its defense and deterrence capabilities against the U.S. and Israel.

He emphasized, "Any strategic misstep or reckless action by the United States and the Zionist regime will exacerbate the regional situation."

Ashtiani condemned the Zionist regime's aerial assaults and its blatant violation of Syria's territorial integrity. Stressing the importance of creating deterrence as the primary strategic approach against these attacks, he announced that necessary and urgent measures, along with strategic planning, are already underway to prevent further aggression from this regime.

Acknowledging the commencement of the blessed month of Ramadan, the Minister of Defense and Support of the Armed Forces referenced Ayatollah Raisi's visit to Syria, the Syrian Prime Minister's visit to Tehran, and the fifteenth High Commission for Economic Cooperation. He emphasized the necessity of ongoing negotiations between the two countries in light of regional developments and the significance of their relationship.

Highlighting the dire circumstances in the region, the Minister of Defense emphasized the tragic toll of over 30,000 fatalities and 70,000 injuries. He lamented the lack of support from the United States, the silence of international organizations, and the inaction of certain Arab and Islamic countries, which have exacerbated the situation.

Ashtiani also drew attention to the ongoing atrocities committed by the Zionist regime in Gaza, condemning the failure of the United Nations and the Security Council to fulfill their responsibilities regarding the war crimes and genocide of the Zionist regime.

Reiterating condemnation of the Zionist regime's aerial assaults and its destructive actions targeting critical infrastructure, such as airports and ports, under the pretext of confronting the axis of resistance, the Iranian minister of defense emphasized the urgent need to establish deterrence. He expressed confidence that Israel's attacks are rooted in the regime's fear and failures. In a stern warning, Ashtiani denounced the unlawful presence of U.S. military forces in Syria, citing their occupation and violation of international law, which has led to instability and the displacement of millions of Syrians. He cautioned against any strategic errors by the U.S. and the Zionist regime, which would further exacerbate the regional situation.

Affirming Iran's commitment to stand alongside Syria, the Iranian general reiterated Iran's readiness to utilize all available capacities to bolster Syria's defensive capabilities and deterrence.

For his part, the Syrian minister said the United States had spared no effort to compromise stability and security in the region. He added the U.S. presence in

Syria was "illegal and aimed at turning the Arab country into a base for supporting separatist and terrorist groups."

Ali Mahmoud Abbas, reflecting on the developments in Gaza, shed light on the weakness of the Zionist regime and exposed the real "hypocritical" nature of the United States and the West to the world. He emphasized the need for increased resistance against destabilizing forces and stressed the importance of bilateral cooperation between Tehran and Damascus in deterring common enemies. Abbas emphasized that the developments that had unfolded in Gaza further revealed the nature of the West and the United States.

Tel Aviv has significantly increased its airstrikes against Syria since last October, coinciding with the start of its aggressive military campaign against the Gaza Strip.

Damascus has lodged multiple complaints with the United Nations regarding the Israeli attacks, urging the Security Council to intervene against Tel Aviv's unlawful actions. However, these appeals have been ignored. On Saturday, the Syrian defense minister held meetings with his Iranian counterpart during a visit to Tehran. During his previous trip to Syria, Ashtiani told the Arab side that Iran was ready to equip the Syrian military forces with sophisticated weapons and open "strategic defense gear" factories. Since the onset of the Western-backed conflict in Syria in 2011, Iran has maintained advisory forces to assist in the fight against terrorism in the country. Both nations have recently expressed their willingness to further enhance cooperation across various military domains.

DAILY TIMES, ISLAMABAD 25-3-2024

Fatah II Rockets: Pakistan's Transforming Defence Landscape

Faiza Abid

In the ever-evolving landscape of global security, the role of advanced missile systems in shaping military capabilities and postures cannot be overstated. Recently, the Armed Forces of Pakistan attained a significant milestone by successfully test-firing the Fatah-II missile, a domestically developed guided Multi-launch Rocket System (MLRS), on 27 December 2023. The rocket seeks to broaden Pakistan's conventional targeting capabilities by carrying out precise attacks deep within the adversary's territory against a diverse range of targets through numerous variants of traditional payloads. This development indicates groundbreaking progress for the country's arsenal, accentuating Pakistan's dedication to enhancing strategic precision and maintaining a credible conventional defence posture.

Fatah-II boasts cutting-edge avionics, a sophisticated navigation system, and a unique flight trajectory. Moreover, The Low Radar Cross-section (RCS) of the rocket minimises the probability of interception. Throughout its trajectory, the rocket can manoeuvre and adjust to its target, ensuring accuracy. According to information from GIDS, Fatah-II has a range capability of hitting targets with a 400 kilometers radius. Guided to its target by an upgraded inertial navigation system (INS) that incorporates satellite navigation, Fatah-II maintains a Circular Error Probable (CEP) of less than 50 metres at its maximum range.

The rocket seeks to broaden Pakistan's conventional targeting capabilities.

The successful integration of Fatah-II rockets into Pakistan's arsenal represents a significant enhancement to its offensive capabilities, reshaping regional dynamics and the military balance in the region. India's current military strategy emphasises dynamic response tactics aimed at enhancing its conventional strength while engaging in operations below the threshold of all-out war. Moreover, India's strategic efforts to establish Integrated Theatre Commands (ITC) indicate a significant step towards enhancing military capabilities. Upon implementation, this initiative could enable the Indian military to effectively employ the army's Integrated Battle Groups (IBG) along the Pakistan border in conjunction with Indian Air Force (IAF) assets. The execution of such strategic maneuvers may have implications for Pakistan's national security.

The introduction of Fatah-II rockets allows Pakistan to enhance its conventional capabilities and effectively counter such efforts, especially considering India's currently lack an effective interceptive capability to this development. By promoting the use of land interdiction techniques, the Fatah-II system is geared towards impeding, disrupting, and neutralizing Indian Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) as they advance towards Pakistan's borders. Consequently, the Fatah-II missile system augments Pakistan's traditional strike capabilities, marking the first instance where the conventional artillery weapons of Pakistan may effectively reach Indian military outposts, munitions depots, central logistics, and air bases. By and large, Fatah-II represents an ideal conventional counterforce weapon in the arsenal of the Pakistan Army for this purpose.

The Fatah-II system not only serves as a formidable deterrent against India, but it also offers versatile operational utility, marking a significant milestone in Pakistan's offense landscape. First, compared to more complex missile systems, the production cost of Fatah-II

is low. The design of the rocket allows for cost savings at various stages of manufacturing, assembly, and maintenance. Similarly, the local production of the Fatah II rockets not only stimulates the domestic defence industry but also keeps the cost lower by avoiding markups associated with importing similar systems from other countries. Additionally, Fatah-II's sensor-to-shooter reaction time is considerably shorter, which makes it a more desirable option for operational commanders, allowing them to engage with targets more rapidly, thereby increasing the overall efficiency of the combat.

Second, the extended range of new surface-to-surface missiles enables Pakistan to eradicate the strategic long-range air defence systems positioned in the enemy's hinterland. The Fatah-II illustrates its capability to counter advanced air defence systems. For example, it can effectively neutralise static targets such as the S-400 missile system by executing saturation attacks, which involve a combination of Fatah-II projectiles, cruise missiles, loitering munitions, and the Fatah-I Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS). The deployment of Fatah-II rockets would enable Pakistan to inundate enemy's operations by effectively overwhelming its air defenses through maximum target saturation. Therefore, this advancement represents a significant leap forward and a unique addition to the country's conventional arsenal.

All in all, Pakistan's persistent drive for progress in missile technology, apparent in ongoing initiatives, reflects its steadfast commitment to upholding a credible conventional deterrence posture and strategic stability in the South Asian region and beyond. This progress will bolster Pakistan's strategic efforts to develop a resilient and adaptable military capability, enabling precise strikes across various distances and with a variety of munitions. Moreover, it signifies a significant stride in strengthening the nation's terrestrial strike capabilities, serving as a deterrent against Indian adventurism while demonstrating Pakistan's indigenous technological capabilities on the global platform.

The writer is a researcher at the Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies (CASS), Lahore.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 18-3-2024
ACM Zaheer Babar will be 9th PAF
chief to serve for more than 3 years

PAF has had about two dozen chiefs, both non-native and native, since the country's inception

By Sabir Shah

LAHORE: After being granted a one-year extension in service by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif Sunday,

country's incumbent Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmed Babar Sidhu, is due to become the 9th highest-ranking officer of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) during the last 76 years to serve for more than three years, research shows.

The PAF has had about two dozen chiefs, both non-native and native, since the country's inception.

Air Vice Marshal Leslie William Cannon (1904–1986) was the first Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Pakistan Air Force (as it was called between 1947 and 1956) to have served for four years and 43 days between May 7, 1951 and June 19, 1955.

Between 1956 and 1972, the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Pakistan Air Force was re-designated as Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Air Force after Pakistan became an Islamic republic in March 23, 1956. The title "Royal" was dropped from the name of the air force.

During this period, Air Marshal Asghar Khan (1921-2018) served for seven years and 364 days, the highest tenure ever enjoyed by a Pakistan Air Force Chief. Asghar Khan called shots between July 23, 1957 and July 22, 1965.

Air Marshal Nur Khan (1923-2011) held this prestigious office for four years and 40 days between July 23, 1965 and August 31, 1969.

On March 20, 1972, the title of this office was changed from "Commander in Chief" to the "Chief of Air Staff" and Air Marshal Zafar Chaudhary (1926-2019) was appointed as the first person to hold this designation. Zafar served between March 3, 1972 and April 15, 1974 or for two years and 43 days.

Air Chief Marshal Zulfiqar Ali Khan 1930-2005) remained in this office for four years and 97 days between April 16, 1974 and July 22, 1978.

It is imperative to note that the Pakistan Air Force had its first four-star rank officer, an Air Chief Marshal, in 1974. The term of the superannuation was then curtailed to three years, as opposed to four years, and the Air Chief was made a permanent member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee.

Since 1974, there has been 14 four-star rank air force officers who have commanded the air force as its Air Chief.

Coming back to officers who served Pakistan Air Force for more than three years, Air Marshal Anwar Shamim Khan (1931-2013) enjoyed this post for six years and 226 days between July 23, 1978 and March 5, 1985.

Air Chief Marshal Jamal Khan (born: 1934) remained on this slot for three years and three days between March 5, 1985 and March 8, 1988.

Air Chief Marshal Farooq Feroze Khan (1939-2021) headed this institution for three years and 244 days between March 9, 1991 and November 8, 1994.

Air Chief Marshal Pervaiz Mehdi Qureshi (born: 1943) enjoyed this office for three years and 13 days between November 7, 1997 and November 20, 2000.

Other officers, all pilots, who headed the Air Force for three years or less were:

Air Vice Marshal Allan Perry-Keene (1898-1987) served for one year and 186 days between August 15, 1947 and February 17, 1949. He lived for 99 years, followed by Asghar Khan who died at 97.

Air Vice Marshal Richard Atcherley (1904-1970) served for two years and 77 days between February 18, 1949 and May 6, 1951.

Air Vice Marshal Arthur McDonald (1903-1996) served for 277 days only between June 20, 1955 and March 23, 1956.

After Pakistan became an Islamic republic on March 23, 1956, Arthur McDonald served for another year and 121 days between March 23, 1956 and July 22, 1957.

Air Marshal Rahim Khan (1925-1990) discharged his duties on this top position for two years and 183 days between September 1, 1969 and March 2, 1970.

Air Chief Marshal Hakimullah Khan Durrani (1935-2024) served for three years between March 9, 1988 and March 9, 1991.

Air Chief Marshal Abbas Khattak (born: 1934) remained in this office from November 8, 1994 and November 7, 1997 or for two years and 364 days.

Air Chief Marshal Mushaf Ali Meer (1947-2003) served for two years and 92 days from November 20, 2000 to February 20, 2003.

Air Chief Marshal Kaleem Saadat (born: 1951) served for three years between March 18, 2003 and March 18, 2006.

Air Chief Marshal Tanveer Mehmood Ahmed (born: 1952) served for three years between March 18, 2006 and March 18, 2009.

Air Chief Marshal Rao Qamar Suleman (born: 1954) also served for three years between March 19, 2009 and March 19, 2012.

Air Chief Marshal Tahir Rafique Butt (born: 1955) also completed his stipulated three-year term between March 19, 2012 and March 19, 2015.

Air Chief Marshal Sohail Aman (born: 1959) also vacated the office after serving for three years from March 19, 2015 to March 19, 2018.

Air Chief Marshal Mujahid Anwar Khan (born: 1962) discharged his professional obligations for three years between March 19, 2018 and March 19, 2021.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 19-3-2024
PLA Navy, Air Force join China Coast Guard in combat exercise

By Liu Xuanzun

The navy and air force of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Eastern Theater Command recently joined the China Coast Guard (CCG) and held a series of combat exercises across several maritime regions amid tensions in the Taiwan Straits, a move experts said on Monday will contribute to the safeguarding of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, as well as peace and stability in the region.

A task force attached to a frigate detachment affiliated with the navy of the PLA Eastern Theater Command recently conducted a cross-regional, multi-course, round-the-clock realistic combat exercise in collaboration with the air force and the coast guard, the PLA Navy said in a press release on Monday.

Type 056A corvettes, the PLANS (People's Liberation Army Navy Ship) *Ezhou*, and the PLANS *Yiwu*, the CCG Ship 11506 and an air force fighter jet were parts of the exercise, according to the press release and photos provided.

During the exercise, the naval vessels simulated air defense using main guns and close-in weapons systems against incoming missiles before the PLANS *Ezhou* intercepted the hostile aircraft, while the PLANS *Yiwu* was then tasked with the mission to clear sea mines, the press release said.

The corvettes then held joint training sessions with the CCG simulating emergencies such as violent resistance against law enforcement, the PLA Navy said in its release.

Focused on the joint operation among the naval task force, the air force and the coast guard, the exercise amplified emergency scenarios to the strictest and the most difficult settings, and effectively enhanced the forces' interoperability and joint strike capabilities, the PLA Navy said.

The cross-service exercise under the Eastern Theater Command came at a time when the CCG has been boosting its law enforcement patrols in the waters near Kinmen after the fatal February 14 boat incident, in addition to the Democratic Progressive Party authorities' continued "Taiwan independence" attempts and collusions with the US, observers said.

Tasked with law enforcement missions, the CCG plays a special role in safeguarding territorial sovereignty and maritime rights, as well as the lives and properties of fishermen from both sides of the Taiwan Straits, and the latest joint exercise showed that in emergencies, the CCG will be backed by the PLA, a Beijing-based

military expert who requested for anonymity told the Global Times on Monday.

Since the military reform, the PLA has stressed joint operation, and the same goes for the People's Armed Police and the CCG, the expert said.

The PLA and the CCG's display of their capability to conduct joint operations is conducive to the safeguarding of national sovereignty, security, as well as peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits, the experts said.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 30-3-2024
China has 1.27 million registered drones in 2023, supported by leading manufacturing capability

By Global Times

The total volume of China's registered drones reached 1.27 million as of the end of 2023, increasing by 32.2 percent year-on-year, according to Civil Aviation Administration of China on Friday.

The Government Work Report of 2024, which was approved during the two sessions earlier this month, stated that China will develop new quality productive forces including fostering new growth engines in fields such as the low-altitude economy and underlined the development path of the drone industry.

The rapid growth of the drone industry in China will be a long-lasting trend and is expected to be accelerated in the future, Wang Yanan, chief editor of Beijing-based Aerospace Knowledge magazine, told the Global Times on Friday, adding that the types of civil drone will be further segmented and used in more industries.

"China's leading manufacturing capability can produce nearly every type of drones, and can support the rapid growth of the industry," he noted.

In 2023, accumulated flight hours of China's civil drones were recorded at 23.11 million hours, up 11.8 percent year-on-year. Civil drones have been widely deployed in the sectors of agriculture, forestry, livestock farming and fishery, as well as entertainment and photography.

In addition, preliminary management mode and technical standards of drones used in urban scenarios and logistics sectors now have the foundation to be further promoted. Manned and unmanned drone flights have also entered the test and verification phase, according to Xinhua News Agency.

In response to some Western countries' smears that China-produced drones are being used for military purposes, Wang said that China has issued strict regulations on drone exports and taken concrete measures to maintain global security.

Chinese authorities on July 2023 issued two notices implementing export controls on certain unmanned aerial vehicles and related items, a move expected from a responsible major country and one that is conducive to regional security, especially when drones for civilian use are increasingly being converted for military purposes.

"However, a consumer drone cannot be clearly tracked after being sold and some Western countries' allegations are an issue of global security governance, which is not solely China's obligation," said Wang.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 20-3-2024

China launches new relay satellite for Earth-Moon communications

A Long March-8 rocket, carrying the relay satellite Queqiao-2 for Earth-Moon communications blasts off at the Wenchang Space Launch Center in south China's Hainan Province, March 20, 2024. (Xinhua/Yang Guanyu)

WENCHANG, Hainan, (Xinhua) -- China launched a new relay satellite on Wednesday to provide Earth-Moon communications services, a key step for its future lunar exploration missions such as retrieving samples from the far side of the moon.

A Long March-8 rocket, carrying the satellite dubbed Queqiao-2, or magpie bridge-2, soared into the sky at 8:31 a.m. from the Wenchang Space Launch Site in south China's Hainan Province.

After 24 minutes of flight, the satellite separated from the rocket, and entered the planned Earth-Moon transfer orbit with the perigee at 200 kilometers and the apogee at 420,000 kilometers. The satellite's solar panels and communications antennae were unfolded, according to the China National Space Administration.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 20-3-2024

Rocket sends Queqiao 2 relay satellite to lunar orbit

By Zhao Lei

China launched a relay satellite on Wednesday morning to lunar orbit to pave the way for the space power's prospective trailblazing expeditions to the moon.

The Queqiao 2, or Magpie Bridge 2, satellite was lifted atop a Long March 8 carrier rocket that blasted off at 8:31 am from a coastal launch pad at the Wenchang Space Launch Center in China's southernmost island province of Hainan.

After a short flight, the satellite is programmed to be released from the rocket and will then enter into a lunar transfer trajectory.

In the next few days, the spacecraft is scheduled to carry out a series of maneuvers such as a mid-course trajectory correction and a braking operation before it enters an elliptical frozen orbit around the moon to become the second relay satellite above the silver celestial body.

After its arrival in the predetermined orbital position, Queqiao 2 will conduct two-way communication tests with the Chang'e 4 probe that is on the lunar surface and the Chang'e 6, which is waiting for launch at the Wenchang center, to examine its performance, according to space officials.

Developed by the China Academy of Space Technology, Queqiao 2 is based on the CAST2000 satellite framework. It weighs about 1.2 metric tons and has two major payloads — a 4.2-meter parabolic antenna for communications with lunar probes and a 0.6-meter parabolic antenna used to transmit data to the ground control.

Queqiao 2 is primarily tasked with relaying signals and data between the Chang'e 6 robotic mission, which has been scheduled to be launched by a Long March 5 heavy-lift rocket before July.

In the long term, the satellite will also serve the Chang'e 7 and 8 missions that will be the basis for an ambitious multinational plan known as the International Lunar Research Station to be constructed in the 2030s.

Wednesday's flight marked the third mission of the Long March 8, a medium-lift rocket designed and built by the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology, and the first time the type has been used in a lunar mission.

To ensure a successful launch, engineers at the academy designed six flight plans in case that the most preferred launch date is postponed due to bad weather or other unfavorable situations.

They also worked out a new technology that enables the rocket to withstand the effects of upper-atmospheric winds, which often cause hazards to a vertically flying craft.

Moreover, engineers placed additional heat-proof paint-coat on the Long March 8 to offset the extreme heat that challenges every rocket bound for lunar transfer trajectory, according to the academy.