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Vol. : XL No. 5

ISSN 0254-7996

Fortnightly Publication of South Asian Press Clippings

# **Selections From Regional Press**

**Coverage : March 1 – 15, 2024**

**INSTITUTE OF REGIONAL STUDIES, ISLAMABAD**

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THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 7-3-2024

## **Maldives won't renew agreement with India for hydrographic surveys: Prez Muizzu**

**HT News Desk**

Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu has announced that the country will not renew an agreement with India to conduct hydrographic surveys. Instead, Maldives plans to acquire the necessary facilities and equipment to carry out the surveys independently. This decision signals a shift in Maldives' approach towards its maritime activities and highlights a growing desire for self-sufficiency in such endeavours.

During a ceremony held at an island he visited on Monday, President Muizzu made the announcement. "This will allow Maldives to conduct the underwater surveys of the country by ourselves. We will then acquire all insights of our underwater features and prepare charts, they will be drawn by us," Muizzu was quoted by Maldivian news portal Edition.mv.

In addition to discontinuing the agreement with India for hydrographic surveys, President Mohamed Muizzu of the Maldives has revealed plans to establish a 24/7 monitoring system for Maldivian waters. This system aims to enhance control over the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), despite its expansive size, PTI reported on Wednesday. By implementing this monitoring system, Maldives seeks to bolster its maritime security and assert its sovereignty over its territorial waters more effectively.

Muizzu's recent remarks mark the first public commentary from his government regarding its hydrographic survey plans. Previously, Muizzu's government had announced its intention to review over 100 agreements signed with India by its previous administrations.

Initiatives to conduct hydrographic surveys in partnership with India's hydrography office were initiated in January 2021. Under the previous administration of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, Maldives had entered into an agreement with the Indian government to conduct these surveys aimed at mapping the underwater features of Maldives.

"We decided not to renew the agreement entered into with the Indian government to scan and acquire all insights and sceneries of our underwater body. All these underwater details are the property of our heritage. They depart after performing scans in manners that acquaint them to all insights [of Maldives' underwater body], draw maps [from the surveys] and to top it all, we end up having to purchase it from them as well," Muizzu said according to the news portal.

*(With inputs from PTI)*

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 13-3-2024

## **Indian troops begin withdrawing from Maldives after Muizzu's order: Report**

**Manjiri Chitre**

The Maldives President stepped up his anti-India rhetoric and reportedly set a deadline of May 10 for the Indian military to leave the archipelago.

The Indian military, operating a surveillance aircraft in the Maldives, has begun withdrawing from the island weeks after Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu's order, local media reported on Tuesday. According to the Maldivian newspaper Mihaaru, 25 Indian troops deployed in the southernmost atoll of Addu had left Maldives on Sunday, reported AFP.

In January this year, Muizzu asked India to withdraw all Indian military personnel deployed in the Indian Ocean archipelago. Following high-level meetings between the two countries, India had agreed to remove their troops from Maldives under the condition that a number of their civilians equivalent to the military presence are brought to operate the aircraft.

Last week, the Maldives President stepped up his anti-India rhetoric and reportedly set a deadline of May 10 for the Indian military to leave the archipelago - less than a week after an Indian civilian team reached the Maldives to take charge of one of the three aviation platforms in the island nation. Reportedly, around 89 Indian military personnel in the island nation will be gone by May 10.

### **India-Maldives relations**

The relations between India and Maldives have soured ever since Muizzu, who is close to China, became the President. As soon as he came to power, Muizzu pledged to evict Indian security personnel deployed in the Maldives to patrol its vast maritime border.

The relationship between the two countries worsened in January after a massive controversy over some Maldivian ministers, including the deputy minister, made racist remarks targeting India and mocked Modi's attempt to promote Lakshadweep as a tourist destination. The comments triggered Indians on social media, with several people, including celebrities, joining the call to boycott the island nation.

New Delhi also took up the issue with Male as the controversy worsened. However, the Maldivian government issued a statement distancing itself from the derogatory remarks made by the leaders. It also took action by suspending three ministers who made the remarks.

**THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 13-3-2024**  
**India-China spar over PM Modi's trip to**  
**Arunachal Pradesh for Sela Tunnel**  
**inauguration**

*Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said: 'India has no right to arbitrarily develop the area of Zangnan in China.... China strongly deplors and firmly opposes the Indian leader's visit to the East Section of the China-India boundary'*

**Special Correspondent, New Delhi**

India on Tuesday strongly countered Chinese objections to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Saturday visit to Arunachal Pradesh to open the Sela Tunnel, asserting they would not change the reality that the state is an integral part of the country.

China had on Monday objected to the tunnel, maintaining India had no right to develop "Zangnan in China".

Zangnan is how China refers to Arunachal Pradesh.

On how China viewed the tunnel opening, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said: "The area of Zangnan is Chinese territory. The Chinese government has never recognised the so-called Arunachal Pradesh illegally set up by India...."

He added that the "China-India boundary question has yet to be solved". "India has no right to arbitrarily develop the area of Zangnan in China.... China strongly deplors and firmly opposes the Indian leader's visit to the East Section of the China-India boundary," Wenbin said.

In reply, external affairs ministry spokesman Randhir Jaiswal said: "We reject the comments made by the Chinese side regarding the visit of the Prime Minister to Arunachal Pradesh. Indian leaders visit Arunachal Pradesh... as they visit other states of India. Objecting to such visits or India's developmental projects does not stand to reason.... It will not change the reality that Arunachal Pradesh was, is, and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India. The Chinese side has been made aware of this consistent position on several occasions."

**THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 13-3-2024**

**India rejects China's claim on**  
**Arunachal Pradesh**

**Rezaul H Laskar**

*Chinese foreign min had reacted to PM's visit to Arunachal on March 9 by saying the area of "Zangnan is Chinese territory" and the Chinese govt has "never recognised the so-called Arunachal Pradesh"*

India on Tuesday rejected China's contention that Arunachal Pradesh, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a major infrastructure project last week, is part of Chinese territory and said such claims will not change the reality that the state is part of the country.

This was the latest war of words between the two sides over the strategic northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, which Beijing has for long claimed as "Zangnan" or South Tibet.

China traditionally bristles over visits to the region by top Indian leaders but such reactions are usually brushed aside by New Delhi.

"We reject the comments made by the Chinese side regarding the visit of the Prime Minister to Arunachal Pradesh. Indian leaders visit Arunachal Pradesh from time to time, as they visit other states of India," external affairs ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said.

"Objecting to such visits or India's developmental projects does not stand to reason. 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," he said.

The Chinese side, Jaiswal said, has been "made aware of this consistent position" on several occasions.

On Monday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin had reacted to Modi's visit to Arunachal Pradesh on March 9 to inaugurate the Sela Tunnel and other infrastructure projects by saying that the area of "Zangnan is Chinese territory" and that the Chinese government has "never recognised the so-called Arunachal Pradesh".

Wang, who was responding to a question from China's state-run media during a regular media briefing, also said the "China-India boundary question has yet to be solved".

He contended that India has "no right to arbitrarily develop" Arunachal Pradesh and that such moves will "complicate the boundary question and disrupt the situation in the border areas".

Wang also said that China "strongly deplors and firmly opposes" the Indian premier's visit to Arunachal Pradesh and has made "solemn representations to India" in this context.

Modi remotely inaugurated the tunnel, built by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) at a cost of ₹825 crore, from Arunachal Pradesh's capital Itanagar. The world's longest twin-lane tunnel, located above 13,000 feet, will provide all-weather connectivity and allow quicker deployment of troops and equipment to forward areas near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Tawang sector.

**THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 15-3-2024**

**India-China border deployment risk for**  
**potential armed conflict: US intel report**

**Rezaul H Laskar, Neeraj Chauhan**

The report highlights a fragile global order, China's military expansion plans, its aggressive cyber operations. An assessment by US intelligence agencies warns of a "potential" armed conflict between India and China amid large troop deployments by both sides and sporadic encounters between their militaries, adding the

border dispute “will remain a strain” on ties between the neighbours. The assessment further states that China is looking to establish overseas military bases at multiple locations - including Sri Lanka and Pakistan - in its attempt to “project power” and “protect China’s interests abroad”.

“The shared disputed border between India and China will remain a strain on their bilateral relationship. While the two sides have not engaged in significant cross-border clashes since 2020, they are maintaining large troop deployments, and sporadic encounters between opposing forces risk miscalculation and escalation into armed conflict,” states the annual threat assessment of the US intelligence community, released by the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) on Monday, as it talks about potential inter-state conflicts.

The report highlights a fragile global order, China’s military expansion plans, its aggressive cyber operations and its possible attempt to influence the 2024 US presidential elections. It further talks about other conflicts including the Israel-Hamas war and the Russia-Ukraine war. Prime Minister Narendra Modi last week inaugurated the strategic Sela tunnel, built at an altitude of 13,000 feet in Arunachal Pradesh, that will provide all-weather connectivity to Tawang.

Infrastructure projects near Indo-China border have gathered pace since a military standoff with China in Ladakh sector of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) began in May 2020. Both sides have arrayed close to 50,000 troops each in Ladakh sector and India has made it clear that bilateral relations cannot be normalised till there is peace and tranquility in the border areas.

The report also points to possible armed conflict between India and Pakistan as well in case of any provocations from Islamabad.

“New Delhi and Islamabad are inclined to sustain the current fragile calm in their relationship following their renewal of a cease-fire along the Line of Control (LoC) in early 2021. However, neither side has used this period of calm to rebuild their bilateral ties as each government has focused on more pressing domestic priorities including election perpetrations and campaigning and for Pakistan, concerns over rising militant attacks in its west,” the report underscores.

“Pakistan’s long history of supporting anti-India militant groups and India’s increased willingness, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to respond with military force to perceived or real Pakistani provocations raise the risk of escalation during a crisis. There remains the potential for an event to trigger a rapid escalation,” it added.

On China’s plans to create overseas bases in India’s neighbourhood and other areas, the report states that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) will “continue to pursue the establishment of overseas military installations and access agreements in an attempt to project power and protect China’s interests abroad”.

“Beyond developing its military base in Djibouti and its military facility at Ream Naval base in Cambodia, Beijing reportedly is considering pursuing military facilities in multiple locations, including—but not limited to—Burma, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Pakistan, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Tanzania, and the UAE,” it says.

The report notes that Beijing will focus on building a fully modernized national defense and military force by 2035 and for the PLA to become a world-class military by 2049.

“In the meantime, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) hopes to use the PLA to secure what it claims is its sovereign territory, to assert its preeminence in regional affairs, and to project power globally, particularly by being able to deter and counter an intervention by the United States in a cross-Strait conflict”, it adds.

## **THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 9-3-2024**

### **Boosting India-US ties**

#### **Strategic move to counter Chinese challenge**

IN his State of the Union address on Thursday, US President Joe Biden underscored the significance of strengthening ties with key allies like India amid the Chinese challenge. His commitment to confronting China’s unfair economic practices and ensuring a level playing field in global trade highlights the strategic importance of the India-US relations. Their deepening ties in a wide range of sectors are opening myriad avenues for growth and development in both countries. Biden has clarified that the US wants competition with China, not conflict, while exuding confidence that America is firmly placed to win the 21st-century race against the Dragon. India is a vital player in the US scheme of things. Enhanced defence cooperation between the two countries, including joint military exercises and technology transfers, serves as a deterrent against aggression and helps promote stability in the Indo-Pacific region. This region is witnessing geopolitical tensions, particularly in Taiwan. By reinforcing their shared values of democracy, Washington and New Delhi can collaborate to address these conflicts and ensure a rules-based order. The US efforts to bolster multilateral cooperation are bearing fruit, going by the growing clout of the Quad alliance in the face of China’s expansionist moves. The grouping has emerged as a crucial platform leveraging the collective strengths of the member-countries — the US, India, Australia and Japan. It aims to promote a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, where nations can thrive without fear of coercion or intimidation. The alliance also provides a framework for addressing other pressing global challenges, ranging from maritime threats to cybersecurity. It is obvious that the US is determined to keep China on tenterhooks and will try to make the most of its allies’ prowess to achieve its objective.

**THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 5-3-2024**

## **Need an Indo-US collaborative law platform: Attorney General**

**Deepankar Malviya**

*Attorney general Venkataramani emphasizes the need for a bilateral Indo-US legal platform at the India-US Legal Services Summit for vibrant exchanges in law and justice.*

There is a need for a bilateral platform between India and the US to vibrant exchanges in the domain of law and justice, attorney general R Venkataramani said on Monday, addressing legal luminaries at the first India-US Legal Services Summit on Indo-US Cooperation on corporate and Legal Issues. The summit organised by the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce was also attended by solicitor general Tushar Mehta and Manoj Kumar, additional secretary at the law ministry, as well as personalities of the legal field from the US.

“The US is a mini-India and people from virtually all parts of India can be seen in almost all parts of US. We are a good limb of GDP of US as also the GEP, that is, Gross Exchange Product, with exchanges in social, cultural, economic and political,” Venkataramani said. “Indians occupying important positions in the legal field is a great story. Alongside, we must create more enduring and vibrant exchange platforms in the domains of law and justice. An Indo-US comparative and collaborative law platform can be visualized.”

A global legal commons premised on global knowledge and resources should be the vision and goal of the platform, he added. There was also a need to move ahead in dispute resolution, he said, calling for a broader legal framework where international trade and commerce were not hindered by doctrines, principles and procedures.

Mehta urged the gathering to think about setting up a designated centre where lawyers can be permanently available for anyone who wanted to either invest from India to the US, or vice versa. “This Indo-American Chamber of Commerce started somewhere in the late 60s, essentially by industrialists who were leading the industries of the day. It appears that thereafter, the lawyers were also involved in the process, but today the role of lawyers in this chamber of commerce may not be formal, as it should have been,” he said.

“A more formal role of lawyers should be developed to ensure that there is a permanent mechanism under which legal advice can be sought by both India and United States of America in terms of business opportunities, investments, etc., from one particular centre, especially designated by the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce,” the attorney general said.

India is progressing at a fast pace to become one of the leading economies of the world and people from all over the world are looking to invest in the country, he said. When people invest in the country, they require reliable legal assistance, which a legal forum can

provide, Mehta said. A formal centre to provide legal assistance would be “a great service not only to the nation but to the fastest growing economy of this world”, he added.

**THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 15-3-2024**

## **Bhutan PM Tobgay arrives, holds ‘productive’ discussions with Modi**

**New Delhi,** Prime Minister Narendra Modi will travel to Bhutan next week. The PM gave this information in a post on X after a meeting with visiting Bhutanese PM Tshering Tobgay, who was re-elected to the post after five years in opposition.

“Glad to meet my friend and PM of Bhutan Tshering Tobgay on his first overseas visit during this term. Had productive discussions encompassing various aspects of our unique and special partnership. I convey heartfelt thanks to His Majesty the King of Bhutan and the Bhutan PM for inviting me to visit Bhutan next week,” posted the PM on X.

Bhutan is expecting that India will take interest in a major economic development and industrialisation plan drawn up by Thimphu. Tobgay arrived here on Thursday on a five-day official visit to India and his first substantial engagement was the meeting with PM Modi. He was received at the airport by Union Minister of State for Ministry of Consumer Affairs Ashwini Choubey. On Wednesday, the Union Cabinet had approved two Bhutan-related pacts. One was an MoU on extending cooperation in the field of energy efficiency and the other between the Bhutan Food and Drug Authority and the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India for cooperation in the area of food safety. Thimphu has planned a 1,000-sq-km industrial zone on the border with India and is hoping for substantial investments from New Delhi. The Gelephu Special Administrative Region Project is touted as an economic bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia, involving Assam and West Bengal in India and extending to Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Singapore.

**THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 14-3-2024**

## **Cabinet clears MoUs with Bhutan and UAE, Metro corridors in Capital**

**Express Web Desk**

The Union Cabinet on Wednesday approved the signing of two Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) between India and Bhutan in the field of energy conservation, and on general supply of petroleum, oil, lubricants (POL) and related products from India to Bhutan.

The decisions were taken at a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in what could be the last Cabinet meeting before Lok Sabha elections are announced.



As part of the energy conservation MoU, India aims to assist Bhutan to enhance energy efficiency in the household sector. The MoU on POL aims to benefit India and its citizens with improved economic and commercial linkages with Bhutan, particularly in the area of hydrocarbon sector, the government said in a statement.

The Cabinet also approved the signing of an agreement between Bhutan Food and Drug Authority (BFDA) and Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) regarding cooperation in the areas of food safety.

The Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi also gave its ex-post facto approval to the Inter-Governmental Framework Agreement (IGFA) that was signed on February 13 during the PM's high-level visit to the UAE on cooperation for the empowerment and operation of the India-Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). The aim of the IGFA is to enhance the bilateral relations and to further strengthen the relations between the two countries in the Ports, Maritime and Logistics sectors, the government said.

The Cabinet also approved two corridors — Inderlok – Indraprastha corridor and Lajpat Nagar – Saket G Block corridor — of the Delhi Metro having a total length of 20.8km. These will be built at a cost of Rs 8,400 crore.

#### **THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 10-3-2024**

### **Border forces of India, Bangladesh agree to check human trafficking**

#### **Tribune News Service**

**New Delhi,** India and Bangladesh have mutually agreed to undertake combined efforts to bring down incidents of trans-border crimes, human trafficking and illegal crossing alongside the International Border.

They have also agreed to cut down on incidents of attack on BSF personnel by Bangladesh-based criminals.

These agreements were reached during the 54th Director General-level coordination conference between the Border Security Force (BSF) and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), which was held in Dhaka between March 5 and 9.

BSF DG Nitin Agrawal and BGB chief Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman Siddiqui represented their respective forces in the conference.

Reiterating the need for synergistic efforts to uphold human rights and curb violence on the border, both sides agreed to work in partnership and engage professionally by enhancing joint patrolling, vigilance, intensifying public awareness programme, undertaking appropriate socio-economic development programme and sharing of real-time information in order to ensure that incidents of death at the border will be brought down to zero with mutual cooperation in near future.

Highlighting the importance of Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) in curbing trans-border crimes, human trafficking and illegal crossing, both

sides agreed to pursue and share real-time information and investigation reports of traffickers. They also assured to remain extra vigilant to curb such crimes and put all out efforts to make Indo-Bangladesh border crime-free. Both the sides also agreed to aid victims of human trafficking and to facilitate their rescue and rehabilitation as soon as possible as per law of the land. The DG level talks are held twice every year, once in India and once in Bangladesh.

#### **THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 10-3-2024**

### **India and Bangladesh border guards plan to step up coordination to reduce crimes**

#### **HT Correspondent**

Border guards have seized items worth ₹12,120 crore since 2020 from borders, of which nearly 70% was seized from the India- Bangladesh border.

Border guards of both India and Bangladesh will coordinate their night patrols around villages along the international boundary and engage more with villagers to reduce smuggling, human trafficking and attacks on security personnel by transborder criminals, officials aware of the development said on Saturday.

A nine-member team lead by Nitin Agarwal, director general of the Border Security Force, had met with top officials of the Border Guards Bangladesh in capital Dhaka on March 5-9 to work out the modalities. Agarwal held talks with Major General Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman Siddiqui, the new chief of the border guards in that country who was appointed as director general on February 5.

“Highlighting the importance of Coordinated Border Management Plan in curbing transborder crimes, human trafficking and illegal crossing, both sides agreed to pursue and share real-time information and investigation reports of traffickers,” A BSF spokesperson said in New Delhi on Saturday. “Both sides also assured to remain extra vigilant to curb such crimes and put all out efforts to make the India-Bangladesh border crime-free. Both sides also agreed to aid victims of human trafficking and to facilitate their rescue and rehabilitation as soon as possible as per law of the land.”

Meeting between the chiefs of the border security forces in India and Bangladesh are held twice a year, once in each country. Cattle and drugs smuggling are the most common crimes at the India-Bangladesh frontier. In many cases, BSF personnel are attacked by villagers of border villagers in Bangladesh when the forces prevent them from smuggling contraband into India.

Border guards have seized items worth ₹12,120 crore since 2020 from India's borders with Bangladesh and Pakistan, of which nearly 70% was seized from the India- Bangladesh border, official data show. Along the 4096km border, the force seized at least 16,788 cattle in the past three years. India has borders with Bangladesh

in states that include West Bengal, Mizoram, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura.

Apart from dealing with transborder criminals, the two forces also agreed on construction work at the border. “After discussing all the developmental work within 150 yards of international border, both sides agreed to share approved design of competent authority and go ahead with six developmental work on the Indian side and six developmental work on the Bangladesh side,” the spokesperson said. “Apart from above mentioned work, as a goodwill gesture, BSF agreed to a BGB proposal of construction for preserving 18 graves of martyred freedom fighters at Tamabil and Sylhet (both in Bangladesh).”

### **THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 13-3-2024**

#### **Washington values ties with Dhaka, New Delhi**

*Says US state dept spokesperson, reiterates concern about Prof Yunus*

**UNB, Dhaka**

The United States has said it values its relationship with both Bangladesh and India and will continue to work together on the shared interests.

“We value our relationship with both Bangladesh and India. We will continue to work with the governments of the two countries to pursue our shared interests, including [those] to ensure a free, open, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region,” said Matthew Miller, spokesperson for US Department of State.

He made the remarks at a press briefing in Washington on Monday.

Queried about the “India Out” campaign in the region, he said, “... We are aware of the reports of this campaign. I’m obviously not going to comment on any individual consumers’ decisions, whether it’s in Bangladesh or anywhere around the world.”

Responding to a question on Prof Muhammad Yunus, Miller said, “You have heard me speak before about the US government’s concerns surrounding the cases against Muhammad Yunus, including that they could represent a potential misuse of Bangladesh’s laws to harass and intimidate him.”

The spokesperson said Ambassador Peter Haas simply reiterated those comments, acting in his capacity as the US government’s highest-ranking representative in Bangladesh.

Talking to reporters recently after a US delegation’s Bangladesh visit, Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud said there is willingness from both sides -- US and Bangladesh -- to work together and they want to create a new chapter in their relations.

“We also want to begin a new chapter of relations with them,” he said, adding that the people will benefit through strengthening the relations.

Eileen Laubacher, special assistant to the US president and senior director for South Asia, US National Security

Council; Michael Schiffer, USAID assistant administrator, Bureau for Asia; and Afreen Akhter, US Department of State deputy assistant secretary for South and Central Asia, had a three-day visit to Bangladesh recently.

### **THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 15-3-2024**

#### **The US still cares deeply about democracy**

*Reflections on two years in Bangladesh*

**Peter Haas**

My country’s 16th president, Abraham Lincoln, once said, “The best thing about the future is that it comes one day at a time.” As I begin my third year as US ambassador to Bangladesh, these words ring true—each day, I remain impressed by the potential of the country, by the energy and resiliency of its people, and by its vibrant civil society.

As I said last year, Bangladesh has come a very long way from its beginnings. As I look to the future—a future that comes one day at a time—I see opportunity, but also significant challenges. Prior to the January 7, 2024 parliamentary election, the United States advocated publicly for a free and fair election that would reflect the democratic aspirations of the people of Bangladesh.

This did not happen. The United States still cares deeply about democracy—in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Quite simply, we believe democracy is the best way to achieve enduring economic prosperity that serves all of a country’s people. We will continue to support the brave members of civil society and human rights defenders. We will continue to call for an end to the systematic repression and harassment of media professionals who are just doing their jobs. We will continue to press for greater freedom of speech and assembly. And we will continue to call for meaningful political dialogue to pave the way for a more open, peaceful, and democratic society.

At the same time, we will look for areas where Bangladesh and the United States have shared interests. On these issues, the United States is willing to move as quickly as Bangladesh is. I have already begun a series of meetings with cabinet members of the new government, looking for opportunities where we can collaborate on areas of mutual importance.

Social and environmental resilience, for example, is critically important. My team and I intend to continue engagement with Bangladesh on climate change and the transition to clean energy. Climate change affects everyone, Americans and Bangladeshis alike. And I hope to build on our excellent cooperation that brought more than 100 million of Covid vaccines to the people of Bangladesh.

The security relationship between our countries and in the region is also an important one. Our militaries (or armed forces) and law enforcement officials are finding

more ways to expand their ability to work together to counter security threats and alleviate the impact of natural disasters. We also hope to play a role in the modernisation of Bangladesh's military.

On the labour front, the United States believes that Bangladesh must align its laws, policies, and practices with international labour standards. President Biden has set out a global labour strategy that prioritises labour rights around the world. This strategy will guide our actions in encouraging Bangladesh to adopt laws and policies that ensure workers can form and join independent, democratic unions freely and without fear, reprisal or retribution.

The United States remains committed to supporting Bangladesh's progress on labour rights, including through targeted development assistance. The United States is by far the largest foreign investor in Bangladesh, as well as the largest single market for Bangladesh's exports of goods and services. We can—and should—make our economic relationship function for everyone's benefit.

Finally, we will continue to work closely with the government to sustainably provide humanitarian assistance to nearly one million Rohingya survivors of genocide, and to seek a safe, voluntary, dignified, and sustainable return home for all, once conditions in Myanmar allow.

The future comes one day at a time, and each day brings opportunity. Know that the United States stands with the people of Bangladesh as you reach towards that future—and we will always support you on your journey.

### **THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 9-3-2024**

#### **BANGLADESH-INDIA BORDER**

### **Zero death pledge rings hollow 31 killed in BSF shootings last year, says ASK**

**Shariful Islam**

Killing along the Bangladesh-India border marked a gradual rise over the last three years despite repeated state-level commitments to bring such killings down to zero.

The trend continues this year as a Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) member and another Bangladeshi were killed allegedly in BSF firings along the Jashore and Lalmonirhat borders in January.

Last year, 31 people were killed in BSF shootings, the highest since 2020 when 47 Bangladeshis were killed along the border, according to Ain O Shalish Kendra data compiled based on media reports.

The killing of BGB Sepoy Mohammad Roisuddin on January 22 this year sparked condemnation and protests across the border.

“This incident once again demonstrates the trigger-happy characteristics of the border guards of India; the

BSF. The BSF authority cannot be given the right to behave as the executioner,” said Kirity Roy, Secretary of Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM), a rights organisation based in West Bengal.

In a statement issued three days after Roisuddin's killing, MASUM demanded a joint probe by the Indian and Bangladeshi human rights commissions, and called on the international rights organisations to raise voice against the “systematic killings” by BSF.

Dhaka is now hosting a five-day 54th director general (DG)-level border conference between Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and Indian Border Security Force (BSF) to discuss a range of border security issues. The talks end today.

Bangladesh shares a 4,096km long border with India, the fifth-longest land border in the world. A large part of the border remains unfenced, while some border points are known for illegal entry and smuggling of various items, including drugs and cattle.

BSF often claims that its forces open fire in self-defence, although this has been rejected by rights bodies and victims' families who say that is not always the case.

ASK Executive Director Faruq Faisal called for a joint investigation to find out the actual cause of BSF shooting and take action to prevent recurrence of such killings. He said such killings of Bangladesh nationals by the Indian border guards are uncalled for.

In 2022 and 2021, at least 23 and 18 Bangladeshi nationals were killed by BSF members, ASK data show. At least 60 of the 73 Bangladeshis killed in the last three years since 2021 were shot while six were tortured to death, according to the rights body.

In a bilateral meeting on September 6, 2022, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi agreed to work towards bringing the number of “deaths due to incidents” down to zero.

At a DG-level meeting of BSF and BGB in New Delhi in March 2011, it was agreed that BSF will use non-lethal weapons, alongside the regular ones, at some border points on a trial basis.

A BGB press release issued at the time said India would use non-lethal weapons at the entire border area with Bangladesh if the trial proved successful.

Since then, at multiple top-level meetings of the two border forces, BSF agreed to use non-lethal weapons, but the killing on the border continues.

After a recent visit to India, Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud on February 12 told journalists that Dhaka and Delhi agreed on the use of non-lethal weapons to stop border killings.

Five days after the briefing, Bangladeshi fisherman Jahangir Alam, 24, was shot in his right elbow and injured by BSF when he went near the Indian territory while fishing in Chapainawabganj on February 17, local BGB members said.

Earlier on January 28, Bangladesh citizen Rafiul Islam Tuklu was shot dead by BSF in Lalmonirhat's Patgram upazila after he entered India.

And after the death of BGB member Roisuddin, BGB and BSF gave contradictory comments.

BGB Jashore Battalion in its January 24 statement said a BGB patrol team intercepted some smugglers who entered Bangladesh from India with cattle around 5:30am on January 22.

The smugglers tried to flee as the BGB team chased them, and Sepoy Roisuddin got separated from his team in dense fog. Later, it was learnt that he was injured in BSF firing and was undergoing treatment at a hospital in India where he died, the statement reads.

AK Arya, public relations officer of south Bengal BSF, told The Daily Star recently that a BSF jawan opened fire in self-defence after a group of cattle traders attacked him. In the firing, a cattle trader who was wearing a lungi and T-shirt suffered wounds. He was taken to the hospital where he died. Later, BGB sent a photograph of its missing member who was found to be the man killed.

"From our side, the matter is still under investigation," he said by phone.

But Indian rights body MASUM in its statement said there is no evidence that Roisuddin attacked BSF personnel, and that his killing was not retaliatory in nature.

Asked about the continued border killing and India's commitment to bring it down to zero, AK Arya said, "BSF jawans use non-lethal weapons, but when criminals attack them, they use lethal weapons in self-defence."

Former foreign secretary Touhid Hossain said border killing is absolutely unexpected.

Referring to the killing of the BGB member, he said, "They [BSF] could have detained the BGB member, produce him before a court instead of taking the law in their own hand.

"I do not know whether there are any other borders in the world where such a huge number of people are killed. Even, borders of two feuding countries do not experience so many deaths."

Commander of Jashore Battalion of BGB Lt Col Ahmed Hasan Jamil declined to comment citing ongoing investigation.

BGB Director (operations) Lt Col AM Zahid Parvez, who handles the press, did not respond to our calls and text messages.

Approached, Md Mustafizur Rahman, senior secretary of public security division of the home ministry, advised The Daily Star to speak to Mohammad Mukhlesur Rahman Sarker, an additional secretary (ansar and border wing).

Contacted, Mukhlesur said he is not the right person and asked this correspondent to speak to AKM Tipu Sultan, also an additional secretary (political and ICT wing).

Tipu Sultan declined to comment saying he is not the right person to speak on the matter.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan did not pick up the phone despite repeated attempts.

## **THE ISLAND, COLOMBO 15-3-2024**

### **Hot Air and Ruffled Feathers**

*The Island interviews Conservationist*

**Dr. Rohan Pethiyagoda**

The government must have an open and transparent bidding process, says foremost Biodiversity Expert cum Electrical Engineer Dr. Rohan Pethiyagoda. Speaking to *The Island* about the proposed wind power project in Mannar by Adani Wind Energy (Sri Lanka) Limited, he stressed: "We must make payment for the energy only in Sri Lankan rupees even if, so as to compensate for inflation, the price formula is tried to an international currency.

We need to evaluate multiple sites and choose the one with the lowest environmental impact and greatest socioeconomic benefits. And when that is done, maybe the government will still end up choosing Adani, pay 9.7 US cents per kilowatt hour, and locate the project on Mannar Island.

If that is the outcome, fine, environmentalists will just have to suck it up. All I am asking for is for the process, as laid down in law and the government's standard operating procedure, to be followed. As it stands, the project has been decided completely according to the whims of politicians. And we know where that has led this country in the past. That is why we're bankrupt."

Excerpts of the interview:

Q: You released a YouTube video last week criticising the proposed wind power project in Mannar by Adani Wind Energy (Sri Lanka) Limited. As an environmentalist, shouldn't you be a supporter of renewable energy?

A: Indeed, I am a supporter of renewable energy, especially wind power, because it is the cheapest form of energy now. I also recognise that all power generation technologies carry environmental and social costs. The challenge before us is to minimise these costs while developing clean energy. We have the potential to generate around 25% of Sri Lanka's electricity from the wind, and I would like to see us achieving that target within the next 25 years.

Doing so will mean that these turbines will disturb our landscapes, they will cause noise and flicker in local environments, and they will kill some number of birds and bats. Although we have to accept these harms, we also have a duty to minimise them. Cheap, clean energy is needed for national development. But the Adani project falls short on many fronts, and I think there needs to be a national discussion about this before signing off on it.

Q: What are the kinds of problems you are concerned about?

A: First, this is an unsolicited project. We see a foreign company coming to Sri Lanka literally out of the blue, harnessing our wind energy, which is a sovereign national resource, and then selling it back to us for foreign currency over a fixed 25-year contract. How does this make economic sense? If the government called for bids from local companies, Sri Lankan shareholders would have had a chance to invest. That way we don't bleed foreign currency, and what's more, there's tax revenue as well. What is the logic in giving this on a platter to a foreign company?

Q: But it seems Adani Green Energy is investing USD 400 million in this project. Doesn't Sri Lanka need foreign investment?

A: In fact, they are investing less than USD 150 million and borrowing the rest. I can think of many Sri Lankan companies that can make that kind of investment. In any case, government had an obligation to call for bids, so that a transparent competitive process could take place. But the way this deal was transacted smells strongly of fish.

Q: Given that Adani Green Energy is a big energy provider in India too, perhaps they have economies of scale that make them more competitive?

A: In that case, let them prove it by actually competing in a transparent bidding process. Besides, even the price they have quoted, of USD 0.097 per kilowatt hour is several times the wind energy price obtaining in the USA, according to the US Department of Energy. They are making a massive profit on this, and Sri Lankans will have to foot the bill for the whole of the 25-year contract period.

More than USD 2.3 billion flowing out of the country. That is substantially more than the combined cost of the Hambantota Port, the Mattala Airport, Nelum Kuluna and the Matara-Mattala Expressway combined. Those cost us only USD 1.8 bn and although many people claim that those projects were wasteful, at least we have something to show for it.

What's the sense in bleeding yet more foreign exchange at a time when we are officially insolvent and chronically short of foreign currency? Just imagine our plight if we were paying for the hydroelectricity from the Mahaweli scheme in dollars. What is strangest about the Adani project is that it seems no Cabinet Appointed Negotiating Committee was appointed to work out the price and other terms and conditions. According to a statement made by Kanchana Wijesekera, the Minister of Power and Energy as reported in EconomyNext on 8 March, the minister himself was doing the "negotiating". This is a funny how-do-you-do, a shocking abuse of power.

Q: If the project is as bad as you say it is, why has there been no public outcry?

A: People didn't know the facts until the Environmental Impact Assessment was published last month. Besides, these documents are technical and

difficult to digest. But the exposé I published on YouTube had more than 11,000 views in the first 72 hours, which suggests that there is substantial public interest.

Q: As an environmentalist, what is your assessment of the environmental impact of this project?

A: First off, I do not want to be straight jacketed as an environmentalist. I am primarily interested in development. So long as people are poor, the environment doesn't stand a chance. In my world view, prosperity is the key to environmental integrity. In addition to whatever else I am, I am also an electrical and electronics engineer, and so I might be a little more aware of the technical aspects of a project like this.

Q: So, where do you think the Environmental Impact Assessment falls short?

A: My main grievance is that it does not clearly explain why these 50 turbines are being placed on the Mannar Island. Remember, these are massive structures. Each one is almost tall as the Altair Towers in Colombo. They will substantially alter the landscape of Mannar Island and make it unattractive for tourism. The EIA is obliged to consider sites at which the impact could be lower, but it has failed to do so. For example, why can't this project be located in a nearby less environmentally sensitive location such as Seelavatturai, Kondachchi, Arippu or even Kalpitiya? Where is the cost-benefit analysis, or the evaluation of alternative sites?

Q: Why didn't the authorities fail to decide locating it on the Mannar Island?

A: Studies have shown that Mannar Island is among the most important bird areas in Asia, and perhaps the world. Every winter, millions of birds representing more than 120 species, come from all over the northern hemisphere. Some come from as far away as the Arctic Circle, flying over the Himalayas. This is therefore a hugely important conservation site, with huge potential for tourism. In fact, the Ministry of Environment deems Mannar to be an environmentally sensitive area, and this is evidenced by the large number of protected areas there. And these wind farms kill birds, especially because the birds are concentrated into a relatively narrow corridor at this location. Experts such as Professors Devaka Weerakoon and Sampath Seneviratne have eloquently made the case for the greater protection of this national asset, especially so that local communities will benefit. According to the EIA, there are virtually no benefits for the local community.

The EIA doesn't provide a socioeconomic cost-benefit analysis or evaluate alternative sites. In terms of the EIA process, it is incumbent on the proponent to demonstrate that they have looked at alternative sites and selected the one with the lowest impact. As it stands, the EIA is just a whitewash.

Q: Looking through the comments on your YouTube channel, I see that many people disagree with you. What's your take on that?

A: Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but no one is entitled to their own facts. And the facts speak for themselves. I am happy to have a respectful discussion or debate on any issue with someone who identifies themselves by name and has an intelligent viewpoint to offer, but I have no time for those who criticise while hiding behind pseudonyms. I see them as cowards. They do not get my attention. Besides, who wants to argue with a bot?

Q: In your opinion how should this project be implemented?

A: The government must have an open and transparent bidding process. We must make payment for the energy only in Sri Lankan rupees even if, so as to compensate for inflation, the price formula is tied to an international currency. We need to evaluate multiple sites and choose the one with the lowest environmental impact and greatest socio-economic benefits. And when that is done, maybe the government will still end up choosing Adani, pay 9.7 US cents per kilowatt hour, and locate the project on Mannar Island.

If that is the outcome, fine, environmentalists will just have to suck it up. All I am asking for is for the process, as laid down in law and the government's standard operating procedure, to be followed. As it stands, the project has been decided completely according to the whims of politicians. And we know where that has led this country in the past. That is why we're bankrupt.

#### **THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 8-3-2024**

### **India's policy towards Nepal remains unchanged: Envoy**

*Indian Ambassador Naveen Srivastava says India is ready to support Nepal as well as increase its investment in the future.*

**Post Report, Kathmandu,** Amid speculations that India is not happy with the dissolution of the alliance between the Nepali Congress and the CPN (Maoist Centre), and the formation of the new coalition between the CPN-UML and the Maoist Centre, the Indian Ambassador to Nepal Naveen Srivastava has made it clear that India's policy towards Nepal remains unchanged.

The statement of the Indian ambassador comes a day after Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal restructured his Cabinet and added new ministers from the CPN-UML, his own party CPN (Unified Socialist), and the Rastriya Swatantra Party. During separate meetings with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha and Finance Minister Barsha Man Pun on Thursday, the Indian envoy conveyed India's position and view towards the new power equation in Kathmandu.

During his meetings with Shrestha and Pun, the Indian ambassador stated that India considers the political change as Nepal's internal matter. Both Shrestha and Pun took oath of office and secrecy on Wednesday, and Srivastava is the first foreign diplomat to meet and congratulate them.

The apparently sudden political upheaval and subsequent breakup of the previous ruling coalition has left many in Kathmandu and major capitals like New Delhi, Beijing and Washington surprised.

Two years ago, in 2022, the Nepali Congress and the CPN (Maoist Centre) had formed a coalition, contested the federal, provincial, and local elections together, and agreed to lead the government for a full five years by turns.

The Nepali Congress and the Maoist Centre agreed to run the government by rotation. As per the understanding, Prime Minister Dahal was supposed to hand over the premiership to Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba in 2025.

But on Sunday, Dahal cut ties with the Nepali Congress, removed the party's ministers, and inducted 20 new ministers from the CPN-UML, Maoist Centre, Rastriya Swatantra Party and the CPN (Unified Socialist).

There is also a perception in political circles that the new ruling coalition was orchestrated at the behest of China.

"Despite the change in the political equation in Kathmandu, our position and view towards Nepal will remain unchanged," the personal secretariat of the finance minister quoted the Indian ambassador as saying.

"The change in the government is an internal affair of Nepal," Srivastava reportedly said. "That is why I want to convey that India's position towards Nepal will remain unchanged. Our partnership and cooperation with Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal which has been continuing for a year and a half, is satisfactory. We will also work in a similar spirit and trust in the future."

During his meeting with Minister Pun, the Indian ambassador highlighted that the relations between Nepal and India are unique, rock-solid, and based on mutual trust, and that India is ready to support Nepal as well as increase its investment in the future. Sources at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also confirmed that the Indian ambassador conveyed a similar message to Deputy Prime Minister Shrestha.

Srivastava also conveyed the greetings of Indian foreign minister S Jaishankar to Shrestha on the latter's assumption of the new roles as deputy prime minister and minister for foreign affairs, said the foreign ministry.

Matters relating to further strengthening Nepal-India relations and advancing mutually beneficial cooperation were also discussed, the ministry added.

Later in the afternoon, Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Chen Song also called on DPM Shrestha and congratulated him on his new role.

Matters relating to Nepal-China relations and cooperation were discussed on the occasion, said the ministry.

**THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 10-3-2024**

**Nepal, Bangladesh want dedicated grid.**

**Will India comply?**

*As India sees power and power infrastructure as strategic assets, it will be hard to convince New Delhi, experts say.*

**Prithvi Man Shrestha**

Bangladesh State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Nasrul Hamid has stressed the need for a dedicated transmission line between Nepal and Bangladesh via India.

“Power trade will get momentum if there is a dedicated line from Nepal to Bangladesh. This will also benefit India,” the United News of Bangladesh, a news agency, quoted Hamid as telling Indian High Commissioner in Bangladesh Pranay Verma, during a meeting early this week.

Nepal and Bangladesh have never traded electricity. But the two countries are now negotiating tariffs for the export of 40MW of power from Nepal to Bangladesh via India’s existing transmission infrastructure.

But Bangladesh wants to buy more power from Nepal in line with the Himalayan country’s wish. For this, the two sides want a dedicated transmission line via India whose territory separates the two countries, and taking India on board is essential to building a dedicated power line.

But considering how India sees electricity as a strategic product, Nepali officials and experts cast serious doubt over whether India would be ready to build a dedicated line between Nepal and Bangladesh over which it will have less control.

The southern neighbour has a rule of giving project-wise approval to deny the import of power from Nepal and other neighbouring countries when there is Chinese or Pakistani involvement.

India’s reluctance to involve Nepal in building two new cross-border transmission lines on its territory was clearly visible when it proposed that the Nepal section be built by Nepal and the Indian section be built by the southern neighbour during the secretary-level 11th joint steering committee meeting in January.

Nepal had proposed to build the 400kV Inaruwa (Duhabi-Purnia, Bihar) and 400kV New Lamki (Dodhara-Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh) cross-border lines through a joint venture company involving entities of the two countries.

Nepal’s proposal was to use the same model that has been adopted to build the New Butwal-Gorakhpur Cross

Border Transmission Line whose India section is being built by a joint venture between the Nepal Electricity Authority and Power Grid Corporation of India.

“This shows that India does not want to involve any third country in the transmission line on its territory,” said a senior official of the NEA. “So there is a question about whether India will be flexible in building a dedicated transmission line between Nepal and Bangladesh over which it will have less control.”

The official said that both Nepal and Bangladesh have been requesting the southern neighbour to provide a dedicated cross-border power line.

“The Indian side has yet to respond to our request,” the official said, adding that a trilateral mechanism might be required to discuss the matter.

As per the Procedure for approval and facilitating ‘Import/Export (Cross Border) of Electricity by the Designated Authority’ introduced by Central Electricity Authority of India, its designated authority can approve an Indian entity to build a dedicated transmission line to connect with a substation of a neighbouring country. But it is silent on building such power lines between two neighbouring countries through Indian territories.

“I think India will look at the issue of the proposed dedicated transmission line between Nepal and Bangladesh from a strategic point of view, as it has done in overall power trade with the neighbouring countries,” Prabal Adhikari, former deputy managing director of the NEA, said in a recent interview with the Post. “It is unlikely to give up its control over the transmission line that enables trading of power between Nepal and Bangladesh.”

The two countries have identified a couple of routes for a dedicated transmission line via India. One is Anarmari (Nepal) to Panchagarh (Bangladesh), with a total length of 49km. If the transmission line is constructed, 24km Indian territory should be used, Power Grid Company of Bangladesh Limited stated in a presentation.

Another proposed route is Anarmari (Nepal) to Thakurgaon (Bangladesh), whose length will be 83km. In order to build the transmission line along this alignment, 33km of Indian territory will be used. These routes were identified by a joint technical team of two countries.

Officials and experts said that without a dedicated transmission line, it would be difficult to export power to Bangladesh on a large scale. Due to the limited spare capacity of India’s transmission line, Nepal will be able to export only 40MW to Bangladesh once the two countries agree on a tariff.

As per the target of exporting 15,000MW of power by 2035, Nepal plans to sell 5,000MW to Bangladesh in addition to 10,000MW to India. According to the report, Bangladeshi State Minister Hamid said Bangladesh wanted to import 9,000MW of electricity from neighbouring countries.

“If Nepal gives us 3000MW–4,000MW of power right now, we can consume all the supply,” said Bangladesh Ambassador to Nepal Salahuddin Noman Chowdhury in an interaction in Lalitpur in January.

At present, the total installed capacity of power projects in operation in Nepal exceeds 2,800MW. The country, however, has an ambition to develop around 30,000MW by 2035 as it plans to sell electricity in neighbouring markets, mainly India and Bangladesh.

### **TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 10-3-2024**

#### **Iranian ambassador to Pakistan expresses optimism for strengthened ties**

**TEHRAN** - In a recent statement, the ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Pakistan expressed optimism about the growth of relations between Iran and Pakistan under Asif Ali Zardari's presidency.

Reza Emami Moghadam conveyed his sincere congratulations on Zardari's election as the 14th President of Pakistan, emphasizing the hope for enhanced relations during his term.

Emami Moghadam noted that Asif Ali Zardari will bring back the prosperous and amicable days of the historical ties between Iran and Pakistan. The ambassador anticipated a broadening of relations and interactions in various sectors between the two nations throughout Zardari's tenure.

Asif Ali Zardari, co-chairperson of the Pakistan Peoples Party, secured his position as Pakistan's 14th President, marking his second term in office. The 68-year-old Zardari, a joint candidate of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), faced off against Mahmood Khan Achakzai, 75, representing the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), according to Indian Express.

Elected by the electoral college comprising newly elected members of the National Assembly and the four provincial assemblies, Zardari, a businessman-turned-politician and the widower of the late Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, clinched victory with 255 votes, while his rival secured 119 votes, as reported by Pakistani media.

Achakzai, leading the Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), contested from the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), which gained prominence after independent candidates affiliated with Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) joined its ranks.

In a related development, Shahbaz Sharif assumed the position of Pakistan's Prime Minister for the second time last week, adding another layer to the dynamic political landscape in the region.

### **TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 9-3-2024**

#### **Iranian firms ready to contribute to construction of IP pipeline: envoy**

**TEHRAN** - The Iranian ambassador to Islamabad has said that the country's capable technical and engineering companies are prepared to contribute to the construction of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline (IP) as well as the renovation of Pakistan Steel Mills.

Reza Amiri-Moghaddam made the remarks in a visit to the port city of Karachi in southern Pakistan, where he met with Chief Minister of Sindh province Syed Murad Ali Shah on Thursday.

Underlining the importance of the pipeline for transferring Iran's gas to Pakistan, Amiri-Moghaddam described the recent decision by the Islamabad government to finalize the country's share of the gas pipeline as significant, noting that Iranian firms are ready to cooperate in this respect.

The ambassador also said that Iran's railways and roads capacities are available to be used for the development of regional transportation projects such as helping Pakistan reach European and Central Asian markets.

The Pakistani chief minister, for his part, said that the completion of the gas pipeline benefits Pakistan and seems to be a suitable option to assist the country overcome the energy crisis.

During his stay in Karachi, the Iranian diplomat also held talks with the governor of Sindh, Muhammad Kamran Khan Tessori. The governor pointed to his recent visits to Iran, saying that banking cooperation and joint gas projects are inevitable efforts to pave the way for expansion of ties.

The IP pipeline will allow Pakistan to start receiving 750 million cubic feet of gas from Iran daily once the pipeline is completed and commissioned.

Although Iran completed the section of the pipeline in its territory, the Pakistan side failed to do its share due to the U.S. sanctions and lack of funding for the project.

In February 2019, Tehran notified Islamabad of its intention to move forward with arbitration court proceedings for not constructing the pipeline in Pakistan's territory within the specified time frame under the IP gas line project and invoked the penalty clause of the Gas Sales Purchase Agreement (GSPA).

In September 2019, Pakistan's Inter-State Gas Systems (ISGS) and the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) signed a revised agreement for the pipeline's construction, which stipulates that neither Iran nor Pakistan will take the other to court for delays or impose fines until 2024.

Last month, Islamabad finally gave the green light for advancing much-delayed work on the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline within its territory.



The approval comes as Pakistan has scrambled to avoid a staggering 18-billion-dollar fine, with the government authorizing the commencement of long-awaited work on the initial 80-kilometer phase within its borders.

Analysts say the project will improve Pakistan's energy security and support regional industries by providing stable and enhanced gas supplies.

Iran has extended the project deadline by 180 days until September 2024 to avoid a legal dispute with Pakistan at international tribunals.

**EF/**

### **TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 3-3-2024**

#### **Iranian, Saudi ambassadors engage in diplomatic dialogue**

**TEHRAN-** The Iranian Ambassador to Riyadh, Alireza Enayati, engaged in constructive discussions with his Saudi counterpart, Abdullah bin Saud Al-Anzi.

The meeting took place at Ambassador Al-Anzi's office, underscoring the importance both nations place on dialogue and diplomacy.

Expressing his satisfaction with the encounter, Ambassador Al-Anzi took to social media platform X to convey his pleasure at hosting his Iranian counterpart in Saudi Arabia.

He elaborated that the discussions encompassed a broad spectrum of subjects, notably focusing on the bilateral relations between Tehran and Riyadh.

This meeting marks a noteworthy step towards fostering mutual understanding and cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, reflecting a commitment to diplomatic engagement in the pursuit of regional stability and prosperity.

Earlier on February 16, Enayati met with Saudi Minister of National Guard Prince Abdullah bin Bandar bin Abdulaziz in Riyadh.

The meeting marked a significant diplomatic engagement between the two nations.

During the meeting, both officials engaged in discussions on various topics of mutual interest, reflecting the ongoing efforts to strengthen bilateral relations.

The meeting, which took place at the minister's office, was attended by officials from the Saudi Ministry of National Guard, underscoring the importance both sides place on constructive dialogue.

This meeting follows a series of diplomatic engagements, including a notable interaction earlier in February when an Iranian military delegation paid a visit to Saudi Arabia.

The delegation participated in the prestigious World Defense Show (WDS) 2024 in Riyadh.

Furthermore, Ambassador Enayati highlighted subsequent talks with ambassadors from Egypt, Turkey, and Algeria during the Riyadh defense exhibition, which showcased cutting-edge advancements in the defense industry from various nations.

Iran's participation in the exhibition held from February 4 to 8 was significant for several reasons, including the potential for strengthening defense ties between Tehran and Riyadh, as well as showcasing Iran's latest military developments and promoting its defense equipment.

The ongoing cooperation between Riyadh and Tehran across various domains underscores the shared commitment of both sides to enhancing their relationship, marking a positive step forward in their diplomatic engagement.

Notably, the formal commencement of military cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia on November 30, 2023, marked a pivotal moment after nearly a decade-long hiatus.

The WDS 2024 witnessed participation from 45 countries, represented by 750 booths and 115 delegations, showcasing the latest military achievements. Among the attendees, 23 countries, including Turkey, participated for the first time, demonstrating the event's growing international stature.

Additionally, companies from Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Australia, Denmark, Republic of Azerbaijan, Taiwan, Colombia, Croatia, and Ethiopia made their inaugural appearances at the exhibition, underscoring its global reach.

### **DAWN, ISLAMABAD 14-3-2024**

#### **Border protests**

THE border town of Chaman has been protesting — for nearly five months now — against the government's imposition of a passport and visa mandate for movement between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Deep-seated discontent prevails in the local populace — traders, political parties, and civil society members — casting a spotlight on not just this issue but also the region's overall economic hardships. The transition from a relatively open to a regulated crossing with stringent document requirements, understandably aimed at enhancing security in an area notorious for smuggling, has inadvertently impacted the community's way of life. The local economy, which relies heavily on small-scale trade, has been hit particularly hard. While trucks have recently been allowed through, thousands of daily wage workers, who walk across, have been marginalised. A recent report by the HRCP highlights not just the immediate economic repercussions but also the long-term social and humanitarian implications of the border restrictions. It rightly calls for a nuanced approach, suggesting engagement with all stakeholders, including Afghan representatives, to find a balanced

resolution that considers both security needs and the local populace's welfare.

The protesters' demands, ranging from the abolition of the visa policy to the restoration of small traders' welfare packages, represent a broader plea for recognition, respect, and understanding. The proposal to facilitate visas on arrival and establish border markets is a constructive step towards mitigating the economic impact of the new regulations. These measures, coupled with investments in local industries and job-creation initiatives as suggested by the HRCP, could serve as a foundation for sustainable development in Chaman, and the wider Balochistan. The new government must balance the imperative of national security with the legitimate needs and rights of its border communities. It must engage with the protesters, understand their grievances, and explore interim solutions while working towards long-term development goals. Dialogue and diplomacy with the protesters, alongside working with a recalcitrant Kabul, are key to navigating this complex issue. As mentioned previously in these pages, ensuring that the security measures are not perceived as punitive, but as part of a broader strategy to enhance the well-being of all Pakistanis, including those in Chaman, is essential. The path forward should be marked by empathy, engagement, and concerted efforts towards economic empowerment, laying the groundwork for peace and prosperity in the region.

### **THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 10-3-2024**

#### **'Mutual respect for sovereignty key to stable Pak-Afghan ties'**

##### **Staff Correspondent**

**Islamabad:** Asif Durrani, Pakistan's Special Representative on Afghanistan, has said that refusal of Afghans to cross into Pakistan with a passport defies the logic of relations between two sovereign countries.

Mr Durrani said this during his interaction with the Afghan religious, tribal, and business stakeholders, while highlighting the security threats posed by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the detrimental effects of their activities on Pakistan's security.

The interaction was part of 3-day Pak-Afghan Stakeholders Conference organised by Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) in collaboration with its Afghan partner Organisation for Economic Studies and Peace (OESP), as part of their initiative Beyond Boundaries.

Mr Durrani said that cooperation is needed in countering terrorism (CT) efforts and promoting peace in the region. He observed that terrorist groups like Daesh (ISIS) pose a threat not only to Afghanistan but also to the wider region and the world. He called for collective efforts to combat terrorism and promote sustainable regional peace.

The envoy emphasised the importance of documentation such as passports and CNICs for security purposes. He advocated the necessity of implementing biometric measures for border cross-border movement of people to bolster security and minimise threats from non-state actors.

He stressed the need for mutual respect for sovereignty between Pakistan and Afghanistan. He refuted the perception of Pakistan using coercion in its dealings with Afghanistan and said the refusal of Afghans to cross into Pakistan with a passport defies the logic of relations between two sovereign countries.

Mr Durrani accused external actors, particularly India, of supporting TTP militants, citing evidence of their involvement and wanted to address the issue of the militant outfit's funding and external support.

He expressed Pakistan's commitment to ongoing discussions with Afghanistan and assured that efforts were underway to address existing challenges and achieve positive outcomes.

He said that the scholarships provided by the Pakistani government to Afghan students provide equal educational opportunities to them in Pakistan. He mentioned that 4,500 scholarships were announced for Afghan students under the Allama Muhammad Iqbal Scholarship program with 1,500 dedicated to Afghan women, covering various fields of study for a duration of up to five years.

Afghan students underscored that they should be given opportunities for internships in Pakistan equip them with practical hands-on experience and enable them to apply the acquired skills in their home communities.

Concerns were raised regarding the accreditation of online schools and the recognition of degrees obtained from them. Mr Durrani opined that degree recognition falls under Afghanistan's jurisdiction and suggested that these matters should be addressed internally by the Afghan government.

The requirement of a mahram (male guardian) for female students to cross the border was discussed with the envoy who advised them to plan accordingly and bring a mahram when necessary. He emphasised the importance of adhering to visa procedures and regulations.

### **PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 14-3-2024**

#### **Early settlement of situation on China-India border serves common interests of both sides: spokesperson**

**BEIJING, (Xinhua)** -- A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson on Wednesday said that an early settlement of the situation on the China-India border serves the common interests of China and India, adding that it is hoped that the two countries will find a solution

to relevant border issues that can be accepted by both sides at an early date.

Spokesperson Wang Wenbin made the comment at a daily news briefing in response to media report about Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar's recent remarks regarding the current state of relations between India and China.

Both China and India believe that an early settlement of the situation on the China-India border serves the common interests of both countries, Wang said.

Wang said China hopes that the two sides will follow the common understandings between the leaders of the two countries and the spirit of relevant agreements, maintain communication through diplomatic and military channels, and find a solution to relevant border issues that can be accepted by both sides at an early date.

China has stressed multiple times that the boundary question does not represent the entirety of China-India relations, and it should be placed appropriately in the bilateral relations and managed properly, Wang said.

China hopes India will work in the same direction with China, approach the bilateral relations from a strategic height and long-term perspective, Wang said. The two sides should enhance mutual trust and avoid misunderstanding and misjudgment, step up dialogue and cooperation and avoid setting up obstacles, handle differences properly and avoid creating disputes, Wang added.

"In this way, we will bring the bilateral relations to a sound and steady track of development," he said.

### **GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 11-3-2024**

## **GT Voice: Positive trend requires efforts by both China and Australia**

**By Global Times**

With China and Australia making significant efforts to repair their relations, the warming-up of bilateral economic and trade ties is expected to lead to the settlement of more trade disputes, which is hard-earned and needs to be cherished by both sides.

Australian Trade Minister Don Farrell said on Sky News on Sunday that he was hopeful China would lift tariffs on Australian wine once a review finished by the end of March, and that good progress was also being made in relation to lobster imports, Reuters reported.

Farrell's optimistic expectations not only boost the confidence of the local business community in resolving the China-Australia wine dispute, but also symbolize the positive progress of the two countries in resolving their differences and finding new ways of cooperation through dialogue and consultation.

It is no secret that Australia wants China to lift its tariffs on Australian wine, which were introduced in 2021.

Since China announced in August 2023 plans to end anti-dumping and anti-subsidy duties on barley imported from Australia, many in Australia have been expecting the lifting of tariffs on wines.

China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) appeared open to the issue. In September 2023, a MOFCOM spokesperson said that China was ready to work with the Australian side to seek a prompt resolution of disputes, including China's anti-dumping and countervailing duty measures on wine from Australia and Australia's anti-dumping and countervailing duty measures on certain products from China, based on settling the barley dispute.

Despite setbacks in the relationship between China and Australia since 2020, positive signs in economic and trade relations suggest that the two sides still have strong potential for cooperation and share broad common interests. While trade disputes may be inevitable for countries, they should not be politicized or labeled with ideological tags, otherwise, conflicts could be exacerbated rather than resolved.

While managing differences may be challenging, the benefits of constructive engagement are still abundant. For instance, Australia's barley sales to China soared after Beijing scrapped tariffs, with China taking 90 percent of Australia's exports of barley in December 2023, Bloomberg reported.

Maintaining the increasing momentum of China-Australia trade requires efforts from both sides. During the meeting with Farrell in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on February 26, China's Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao said that China-Australia ties showed strong resilience, and he hoped that Australia would pay attention to and actively promote the resolution of specific problems encountered by Chinese enterprises in Australia.

Addressing the concerns of enterprises on both sides is one of the prerequisites for creating a sound business environment for bilateral economic exchanges. This does not represent a "compromise," and the national security of China and Australia will not be harmed. On the contrary, both sides will benefit from strengthened mutual trust, laying the foundation for closer cooperation.

China-Australia economic and trade cooperation has been highly complementary, as China is a large market while Australia is a stable long-term supplier of minerals and energy resources to China.

The highly complementary nature of the two economies is bound to deepen under the economic policy orientation of both countries.

According to the Chinese government work report submitted on March 5 to the national legislature, to pursue higher-standard opening-up and promote mutual benefits, China will promote alignment with high-

standard international economic and trade rules, and steadily expand institutional opening-up.

If anything, the goal of pursuing high-level opening-up sends a clear signal that China is willing to share development opportunities with the rest of the world, representing more market space in China for foreign businesses.

This is certainly a welcome development for Australia, which is paying increasing attention to economic ties with Asia. With the rise of Asian emerging economies, Australia is expected to gain more economic opportunities and development space through trade exchanges and cooperation with Asian countries. China is one of its indispensable Asian partners.

### **GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 15-3-2024**

## **Canada and US' claims of care about Xizang people's well-being merely a tool to interfere in China's internal affairs and leverage geopolitical interests: Embassy spokesperson**

**By Global Times**

China expresses deep dissatisfaction and lodges a stern opposition to Canada's determination to hold an event on the preservation of Tibetans' unique culture on the sidelines of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, as well as hyping up Xizang-related issues and spreading lies together with the US at a public seminar on assessing "China's Assimilationist Policies Targeting Tibetan Language, Culture and Religion," said a spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Canada on Wednesday.

According to a statement from the spokesperson, the organizers and participants of these meetings are filled with anti-China organizations and individuals, among whom the Tibetan government-in-exile is a thoroughly separatist political group which no country in the world acknowledges.

While both Canada and the US recognize Xizang as part of China's territory, they secretly provide a platform for "Tibetan independence" organizations, continuously repeating lies and rumors that have long been debunked, with a real intention to smear China with Xizang-related issues and embolden the "Tibetan independence" forces, the spokesperson said.

Xizang is a high-altitude region with a dispersed population, said the spokesperson. Especially for children from nomadic communities, they face long and inconvenient journeys to school. Providing education in dispersed areas also presents challenges in maintaining teaching quality. To ensure that all children have equal access to education and respond to parents' wishes for their children to study in a safe and comfortable environment, local governments have established

boarding schools. However, whether students live at school is entirely based on the students and parents' wishes and needs.

These schools generally offer traditional cultural courses such as Tibetan language, and students are allowed to wear Tibetan clothes on campus. Parents can visit the school and pick up their children from school at any time, the spokesperson said.

The boarding schools in Xizang are vivid examples of protecting the Xizang people's human rights and their cultural traditions. The so-called forced assimilationist is purely a lie, the spokesperson noted.

According to the spokesperson, Canada and the US have mandatory regulations for their foreign naturalized citizens in term of language, culture and history, and even require them to pass specialized examinations. As Chinese nationals, it is only natural for the Xizang people to possess skills and knowledge of the national language, culture and history, as it is the right and responsibility of every citizen.

"How has this become 'forced assimilationist' and an undermining of Tibetan language and culture in the mouths of those people? Isn't this a blatant double standard?" the spokesperson asked.

Canada and the US claimed that they hope China will not repeat the mistakes they made on the issue of indigenous population and are willing to share their beneficial practices. However, since the peaceful liberation of Xizang, the central government of China has abolished the feudal serfdom system, leading to significant progress in social and economic development of the region, with the lives of the Xizang people undergone tremendous changes compared to before liberation, the spokesperson added.

The indigenous issues in Canada and the US bear no resemblance to the Xizang issue. What they should do is to learn from China's successful cases instead of using their own guilt as an excuse and basis for accusing other countries, engaging in baseless slander and defamation against China.

Canada and the US claim to oppose "foreign interference" yet are obsessed with hyping up Xizang-related issues to interfere in China's internal affairs. What they care about is not Xizang people's well-being at all, which is rather merely a tool for them to wantonly interfere in China's internal affairs and seek geopolitical interests, the spokesperson said.

What I want to emphasize is that the tremendous achievements in development since the peaceful liberation of Xizang cannot be covered by the slander and defamation from the US and the West, the spokesperson said, adding that the scheme of "turning Xizang into a card to contain China" will never succeed.

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3.	Lok Sabha Elections 2024: Wooing exes key to BJP's Mission 400 By J.P. Yadav	The Telegraph, Kolkata	8-3-2024	18
4.	NDA finalises seat-sharing in Andhra Pradesh: BJP gets 6 Lok Sabha, 10 assembly seats; TDP 17 and 144 - PTI	The Telegraph, Kolkata	13-3-2024	18
5.	Congress's 2nd list for LS polls: Nakul Nath to contest from Chhindwara, Gaurav Gogoi from Jorhat - PTI	The Telegraph, Kolkata	13-3-2024	19
6.	TMC snubs Congress, names nominees for all 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal By Shubhadeep Choudhury <b>Rajya Sabha Elections- Updates</b>	The Tribune, Chandigarh	11-3-2024	20
7.	INDIA-NDA battle for Rajya Sabha berths from Jharkhand set to be easy By Animesh Bisoe	The Telegraph, Kolkata	13-3-2024	21
8.	An extra berth: On the Rajya Sabha election results <b>Electoral Bond Issue</b>	The Hindu, Delhi	1-3-2024	21
9.	Dubious response: On the State Bank of India and the Electoral Bond scheme	The Hindu, Delhi	9-3-2024	21
10.	Electoral bonds disclosure: Contempt plea against SBI for 'defying' Supreme Court order By Satya Prakash	The Tribune, Chandigarh	8-3-2024	22
11.	Editorial on SBI's reluctance to disclose electoral bond details <b>Political Developments – Kashmir</b>	The Telegraph, Kolkata	12-3-2024	22
12.	PM in Kashmir Editorial	The Tribune, Chandigarh	8-3-2024	23
13.	Farooq Abdullah questions PM Modi on Article 370, BJP's 'dynasty' charge By Adarsh Kumar Gupta	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	9-3-2024	23
14.	Former Jammu and Kashmir CM Farooq Abdullah seeks probe into Modi's 370 claims By Muzaffar Raina <b>Farmers Protest</b>	The Telegraph, Kolkata	10-3-2024	24
15.	Farmers Protest: 9 trains cancelled in Ambala division due to 'rail roko' - HT News Desk	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	11-3-2024	24

16.	SKM to hold 'mahapanchayat' in Delhi on Thursday; police allow gathering of 5,000 farmers, no tractor-trolleys allowed <b>BANGLADESH</b> <b>Political Developments</b>	The Tribune, Chandigarh	14-3-2024	25
17.	Voters had no scope to pick candidates of their choice in Jan 7 JS polls: EU By Diplomatic Correspondent	The Daily Star, Dhaka	10-3-2024	25
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19.	Treenamool Jatiya Party floated By Staff Correspondent <b>SRI LANKA</b> <b>Political Developments</b>	The Daily Star, Dhaka	10-3-2024	27
20.	Political Speculation Swirls Ahead of Elections By Lakdeve Liyanagama	Daily News, Colombo	14-3-2024	28
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22.	SLPP founder returns  <b>NEPAL</b> <b>Political Developments</b>	Daily News, Colombo	6-3-2024	30
23.	Ruling alliance is here to stay, Nepali Congress leaders say - Post Report	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	2-3-2024	30
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25.	Dahal blames Congress to justify new alliance - Post Report <b>IRAN</b> <b>President Elections</b>	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	8-3-2024	32
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28.	45 parliamentary seats will be decided in run-off election <b>PAKISTAN</b> <b>Political Developments</b>	Tehran Times, Tehran	6-3-2024	35
29.	Asif Zardari sworn in as 14th president of Pakistan	Dawn, Islamabad	8-3-2024	36
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**THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 15-3-2024**  
**Express View on One Nation One  
 Election: No last word**

The High Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind, has unanimously recommended that polls to the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, municipalities and panchayats be held at the same time. This is no surprise. With Congress Leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury refusing to participate, the eight-member panel comprised those mostly seen to agree with the government's views on the proposal. Its terms of reference also carried the presumption that simultaneous polls are in "national interest". The question, then, is whether the Kovind Committee report has merely rubber-stamped the government's proposal or if its conclusions are a product of considered deliberations. The report says that the panel invited suggestions and comments from political parties, legal experts, former election commissioners, economists, representatives of business organisations and members of the Bar Council. It says that "the committee carefully considered all the constitutional and legal objections" and its members "studied the relevant legal literature on elections, both in India and abroad". Unfortunately, in its substance, tone and tenor, the document does not seem informed by "in-depth research and analysis" and "participatory processes".

Simultaneous elections will impose an artificial unitary character on a federal system of multiple diversities. The report, at best, engages cursorily with this concern. Instead, its 320-odd pages belabour "that separate elections cause a waste of resources, result in policy paralysis and inflict huge socio-economic costs, besides leading to voter fatigue". This is only a harkening back to the *raison d'être* cited by the government in September last year when it mooted One Nation One Election (ONOE). The document notes that 15 political parties have opposed the move, but there is little by way of engaging with, or addressing, their criticism or that of dissenters like Tamil Nadu Election Commissioner, V Palanikumar, who told the panel that "ONOE could potentially dilute the focus on region-specific challenges and diminish the efficacy of local governance". The suggestion of former Chief Justice of the Madras High Court, Sanjib Banerjee — "state funding of elections is a more effective reform to tackle inefficiency" — finds a mention. So do the concerns of former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, AP Shah, "that simultaneous elections hinder political accountability as fixed terms offer representatives unwarranted stability without performance scrutiny." These compelling arguments have been crunched into a few sentences in the report. Unfortunately, the report does nothing more than dismiss these apprehensions as "misplaced".

Undoubtedly, the Indian electorate is, as the report says, "sagacious enough to differentiate between national and regional issues, as also between national and regional parties". But ONOE could flatten the political diversity that has marked India's electoral calendar since the Sixties when the synchronicity of the election calendar was first broken. Much has changed in the Indian polity since then, including the ascendance of regional parties in large parts of the country. The Samajwadi Party's response underlined the fear that "State-level parties will not be able to compete with national parties in electoral strategy and expenditure", which too does not seem to adequately draw the attention of the committee. The panel's report cannot be the last word on a proposal with far-reaching consequences that go beyond political-ideological lines. In days to come, the legitimate concerns of those who disagree must be heard respectfully, and heeded.

**THE HINDU, DELHI 13-3-2024**  
**A tale of two: On alliance-building by  
 BJP and Congress**

*The BJP and the Congress have taken contrasting approaches to building alliances*

After raising its stakes in the forthcoming general election by declaring a target of 400 seats along with allies, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is mopping up political partners across the country to resurrect the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Just as the BJP is courting allies with alacrity, the putative alliance of Opposition parties that appeared on the horizon in mid-2023 is unravelling, if at all it ever took any concrete form. The BJP has announced a tie-up with Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party which had parted ways in 2018 over the issue of unfulfilled promises for Andhra Pradesh. Mr. Naidu has slowly made his way back to the NDA by distancing himself from the Opposition. The BJP is assiduously courting the Biju Janata Dal, to revive their alliance formed between 1998-2009, in Odisha. The Akali Dal is waiting for the farmers' agitation to blow over before it could make its next move, potentially to march back to the NDA camp. Efforts are on to bring the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam back into the NDA's fold in Tamil Nadu. The most striking of all the recent realignments has been that of Janata Dal (United) chief and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who is now championing a third consecutive term for the BJP at the Centre, after calling for its defeat in the preceding months.

A corresponding disarray is evident in the Opposition camp, as parties and individual leaders are jumping on the BJP bandwagon. The emaciated INDIA bloc also suffers from incoherence with allies such as the Trinamool Congress which, after weeks of talks with the Congress, announced candidates for all 42 seats of

West Bengal, leaving nothing for the principal Opposition party. To add insult to injury, Mamata Banerjee has fielded cricketer Yusuf Pathan from Baharampur against Congress state President Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury. In Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena (UBT) has unilaterally announced some candidates, threatening the alliance with the Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) and the Congress. In Kerala, the Left parties and the Congress, two key proponents of national Opposition unity will be facing off. This usual paradox is starker this time, as Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and CPI leader Annie Raja are opponents in Wayanad. It is not a coincidence that many of the leaders and parties that are taking positions convenient for the BJP, if not openly joining hands with it, are facing investigations by central agencies. This role of the state in influencing party politics in India is a disturbing sign for the health of Indian democracy, and also of the inglorious records of the many Opposition leaders.

**THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 8-3-2024**  
**Lok Sabha Elections 2024: Wooing exes**  
**key to BJP's Mission 400**

*Over the past few years, the BJP had largely behaved as though it did not care much for allies and that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was capable of single-handedly winning it elections in the states and at the Centre*

**J.P. Yadav**, New Delhi

The BJP has set its sights on alliances with the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh and the Shiromani Akali Dal in Punjab after clinching a deal with the BJD in Odisha that now awaits only a formal announcement, party insiders said.

All three parties are former allies that had dumped the BJP.

Over the past few years, the BJP had largely behaved as though it did not care much for allies and that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was capable of single-handedly winning it elections in the states and at the Centre. It had been dismissive about desertion by long-time friends, even its oldest ally Shiv Sena.

The current push for alliances therefore appears to mark a shift in attitude and is almost certainly a consequence of Modi setting the NDA a target of winning 400 of the Lok Sabha's 543 seats.

Desam chief Chandrababu Naidu and his ally Pawan Kalyan, who heads the Jana Sena Party, began seat-sharing talks with the BJP leadership late on Thursday night.

BJP insiders said that two rounds of discussions had already taken place with Naidu and the latest meeting was likely to thrash out a final arrangement.

Seat negotiations are also in progress with the Akali Dal, party leaders said.

The Akalis had snapped ties with the BJP over the three controversial and now-revoked farm laws of 2020. The Desam had walked out before the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, protesting the Centre's failure to honour the promises made to Andhra after the 2014 bifurcation of the state.

The Biju Janata Dal had left the NDA in 2009 without any clear reason being cited, apart from that of the regional party being strong enough to go solo.

"We are now trying to get back all the NDA partners who had left us. Our focus is on increasing our Lok Sabha tally, and seat-sharing arrangements are being worked out with that in mind," a BJP leader said.

He explained that whatever the previous arrangements with these parties were when they were in the NDA, the new deals would ensure that the BJP got the lion's share of seats in the Lok Sabha polls.

For instance, under the agreement with the BJD, the BJP gets to contest the bulk of Odisha's Lok Sabha seats while the ally will have the upper hand in the Assembly polls, to be held concurrently with the general election.

Party insiders said the BJP was likely to contest 14 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats in Odisha.

A formal announcement of the BJD's return to the NDA, and of the details of the seat shares, is expected soon, sources said. "There are some differences over the Assembly seats that are expected to be ironed out soon," a BJP leader said.

The BJP had won 8 Lok Sabha seats in Odisha in 2019, and hopes to do much better this time.

"Odisha and Andhra Pradesh are states where we can increase our seats tally to reach the (BJP's) target of 370 (as part of the 400 the NDA is eyeing)," a BJP parliamentarian from Odisha said.

In Andhra, too, the BJP is intent on bagging the majority of the Lok Sabha seats, and hopes to capitalise on Naidu's perceived desperation to return to the NDA.

The BJP is looking to drive a hard bargain in Bihar, too, and get Nitish Kumar's JDU to settle for fewer seats than before. The two parties had contested 17 seats each in the 2019 elections, leaving 6 of Bihar's 40 seats for the LJP.

**THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 13-3-2024**  
**NDA finalises seat-sharing in Andhra**  
**Pradesh: BJP gets 6 Lok Sabha, 10**  
**assembly seats; TDP 17 and 144**

*Under the deal, Pawan Kalyan's JanaSena will contest two Lok Sabha and 21 assembly seats, TDP supremo N Chandrababu Naidu announced after the meeting*  
**PTI, Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh)**

Andhra Pradesh NDA partners finalised their seat-sharing formula for the Lok Sabha and state polls following a marathon discussion on Monday, under which the BJP will contest six Lok Sabha and 10



assembly seats while the TDP will fight 17 parliamentary and 144 state seats.

Under the deal, Pawan Kalyan's JanaSena will contest two Lok Sabha and 21 assembly seats, TDP supremo N Chandrababu Naidu announced after the meeting.

Senior BJP leader and Union Jal Shakti Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat went into a huddle with TDP supremo Naidu and JanaSena chief Kalyan in Amaravati to finalise seat-sharing for the upcoming Parliamentary and Assembly elections.

"In Amaravati today, the BJP, TDP and JSP (Janasena) forged a formidable seat-sharing formula. With this significant step, the people of Andhra Pradesh now stand on the threshold of reclaiming our state and paving the way for a brighter future. I humbly call upon my people of Andhra Pradesh to shower their blessings upon this alliance, and grant us a historic mandate to serve them," said Naidu in a post on X.

The state has 25 Lok Sabha and 175 assembly seats.

JanaSena was initially supposed to contest 24 assembly and three Lok Sabha seats, but in the seat-sharing formula it got 21 assembly and two Lok Sabha seats, after the TDP joined the NDA alliance recently.

The 2024 polls will be the first time the three parties are contesting the polls together. Back in 2014, when TDP and BJP fought the polls together, JanaSena was their outside ally.

The TDP and JanaSena have announced the names of 100 candidates already, and Naidu said the respective parties will name other candidates soon.

According to the TDP supremo, the Monday brainstorming exercise sought to forge a formidable combination of seats for every alliance partner that truly represents the people of Andhra Pradesh and their aspirations.

Meanwhile, TDP sources said that the state's opposition party have invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi to attend an election meeting which could take place between March 17 and 20.

"We have invited Modi for the meeting, mostly he will come for the meeting, date is not yet finalised. We proposed March 17 but a day here and there, mostly Modi will be there. Between March 17 and 20 it will happen. That will be a good way to kick off the campaign. Modi, Naidu, Pawan, all together," the sources added.

Another TDP source emphasised that if Modi participates in this meeting, it could be the first time in a decade that Modi, Naidu and Kalyan would be sharing stage.

## **THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 13-3-2024**

### **Congress's 2nd list for LS polls: Nakul Nath to contest from Chhindwara, Gaurav Gogoi from Jorhat**

*The second list came a day after the Congress' central election committee, chaired by party chief Mallikarjun Kharge, met at the party headquarters here to finalise the candidates*

#### **PTI, New Delhi**

The Congress on Tuesday announced its second list of 43 candidates for the Lok Sabha polls, fielding Kamal Nath's son Nakul Nath once again from Madhya Pradesh's Chhindwara and Ashok Gehlot's son Vaibhav Gehlot from Rajasthan's Jalore.

The party's deputy leader in the Lok Sabha Gaurav Gogoi has been fielded from Assam's Jorhat and sitting MP Pradyut Bordoloi from Nagaon. Gaurav Gogoi, the son of former Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi, is the sitting MP of Kaliabor.

Rahul Kaswan, who switched over from the BJP a few days ago, has been fielded from Churu in Rajasthan. Kaswan is the outgoing MP from Churu and has represented the constituency twice.

He is the son of four-time former MP Ram Singh Kaswan and grandson of former MP Deep Chand Kaswan. His mother Kamala Kaswan was an MLA.

While Harish Chandra Meena, a close confidant of senior Congress leader Sachin Pilot and former DGP, has been fielded from the Tonk-Sawai Madhopur constituency, Karan Singh Uchiyarda will contest from Jodhpur.

Vaibhav Gehlot, who unsuccessfully contested the last Lok Sabha election from Jodhpur, has been fielded from Jalore this time.

The list has several young faces who have replaced the old guard. Of the party's 43 candidates on this list, 76.7 per cent are below the age of 60 years.

Announcing the candidates at a press conference at Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge's residence here, AICC general secretary K C Venugopal said the second list comprises 12 seats from Assam, 10 each from Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, seven from Gujarat, three from Uttarakhand and one seat from Daman and Diu.

"Out of the 43 candidates, 33 are from SCs/STs/OBCs and minorities. This second list clearly reflects our idea as 76.7 per cent of the candidates are from SCs, STs, OBCs and minorities and also, 76.7 per cent (of the candidates) are those below 60 years," he said, adding that the party has fielded young faces and ensured social justice as well.

Congress treasurer Ajay Maken said 25 of the candidates announced by the party are below 50 years of age, eight between 51 and 60 years and 10 between 61 and 72 years.

"We hope the people will help these good candidates win the Lok Sabha election and help fulfil the Congress' guarantees and strengthen the Congress' ideology in the Lok Sabha," he said.

Among those fielded from Assam are Garjan Mashhary from the Kokrajhar-ST seat, former minister and MLA Rakibul Hussain from Dhubri, Deep Bayan from Barpeta, Madhab Rajbanshi from Darrang-Udalguri, Mira Barthakur Goswami from Guwahati, Joyram Englung from Diphu-ST, Hafiz Rashid Ahmed Choudhury from Karimganj and Surjya Kanta Sarkar from Silchar-SC.

The Congress this time denied a ticket to the sitting MP from Barpeta Abdul Khaleeque and fielded Bayan from the seat.

In Uttarakhand, former state Congress chief Ganesh Godiyal has been fielded from the Garhwal seat, former MP Pradeep Tamta from Almora-SC and Jot Singh Guntsola from Tehri-Garhwal.

The party fielded Ketan Dahyabhai Patel from Daman and Diu.

In Gujarat, the Congress' former social media chief Rohan Gupta has been fielded from the Ahmedabad-East seat.

The party's second list has only four women candidates.

In its first list of candidates for the Lok Sabha elections, the Congress announced 39 names.

The second list came a day after the Congress' central election committee, chaired by Kharge and former party chief Sonia Gandhi, met at the party headquarters here to finalise the candidates.

In the meeting, discussions were held for more than 60 seats in the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh and Assam and the Union Territory of Daman and Diu.

### **THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 11-3-2024**

## **TMC snubs Congress, names nominees for all 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal**

*Yusuf Pathan fielded from Adhir Ranjan's seat | Kirti Azad, Shatrughan, Mahua also on list*

### **Shubhadeep Choudhury**

**New Delhi,** In a snub to the Congress, which has been maintaining that talks with the Trinamool Congress (TMC) for the coming Lok Sabha elections are still on,

the TMC on Sunday announced candidates for all 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal.

The Congress and the TMC, both members of the opposition INDIA bloc, had been trying to reach a seat-sharing arrangement in Bengal for months. However, the TMC could not come to terms with the Congress' demand for giving it eight seats.

Having announced the candidates, the Mamata Banerjee-led TMC today made it clear that it was not interested in an alliance with the Congress in the state.

The choice of candidate for Berhampore, represented in the Lok Sabha by Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, leader of the Congress in the Lok Sabha and WBPC chief, apparently contained a message.

Star cricketer Yusuf Pathan has been fielded by the TMC from Berhampore, Chowdhury's seat. The Congress leader, reputed to be a sworn enemy of TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee, staunchly opposed what he thought was a "bad deal" being offered by the TMC to the Congress for joining hands against the BJP in West Bengal.

"Our doors are always open and an alliance can happen anytime before withdrawal," Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said when asked about the announcement of candidates by the TMC today.

Congress general secretary in charge of communications Jairam Ramesh sounded upset and wrote on X, "The Congress has repeatedly declared its desire to have a respectable seat-sharing agreement with the TMC in West Bengal. The Congress has always maintained that such an agreement has to be finalised through negotiations and not by unilateral announcement."

The names of the candidates were announced by TMC general secretary Abhishek Banerjee at a rally at Kolkata's iconic Brigade Parade Ground today. The nominees were later paraded by party supremo Mamata Banerjee in a dramatic fashion on a ramp erected at the ground.

The TMC renominated 16 sitting MPs, fielded 12 women and brought in several new faces. Besides Pathan, it has also fielded former India cricketer Kirti Azad, son of former Bihar Chief Minister Bhagwat Jha Azad, from the Bardhaman-Durgapur constituency. The seat is now represented by BJP's SS Ahluwalia.

From the Basirhat Lok Sabha seat, where Sandeshkhali is situated, the TMC has pitted its former MP Haji Nurul Islam by dropping sitting MP Nusrat Jahan.

The TMC also re-nominated expelled MP Mahua Moitra from the Krishnanagar seat for the second consecutive term. While former Bollywood star Shatrughan Sinha would defend his Asansol constituency, popular TV presenter Rachana Banerjee will engage BJP's Locket Chatterjee at Hoogly.

**THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 13-3-2024**

**INDIA-NDA battle for Rajya Sabha berths from Jharkhand set to be easy**

*In the absence of a third candidate in the fray, both Pradeep Verma from the BJP-led NDA and JMM's Sarfaraz Ahmed are expected to win unopposed the two Rajya Sabha seats in the state for which elections will be held on March 21*

**Animesh Bisoee**, Jamshedpur

Pradeep Verma from the BJP-led NDA and JMM's Sarfaraz Ahmed from the INDIA bloc on Monday filed their nomination papers for the Rajya Sabha polls in Jharkhand.

In the absence of a third candidate in the fray, both of them are expected to win unopposed the two Rajya Sabha seats in the state for which elections will be held on March 21.

Verma was accompanied by BJP state president Babul Marandi, leader of the Opposition in the Jharkhand Assembly Amar Bauri, Ajsu MLA Lambodar Mahato and NCP MLA Kamlesh Singh during the filing of nomination. Ahmed was accompanied by chief minister Champai Soren, cabinet minister and Congress legislative party leader Alamgir Alam and CPI-ML MLA Vinod Singh.

The JMM-led ruling alliance with the Congress and the RJD has 47 MLAs in the 81-member state Assembly, while the BJP has 26 MLAs and the Ajsu party three. While lone NCP MLA has pitched in for the NDA, the lone CPI(ML) MLA is supporting the INDIA bloc. One nominated member (from the Anglo-Indian community) had supported Champai Soren during the floor test in the Assembly last month. There are also two Independent MLAs.

The JMM has 29 MLAs in the ruling alliance, the Congress has 17 and the RJD has one MLA and will have the support of CPI(ML) and the nominated member.

JMM spokesperson Supriyo Bhattacharya had on Sunday confirmed that Sarfaraz will be the INDIA bloc candidate for the Rajya Sabha elections.

**THE HINDU, DELHI 1-3-2024**

**An extra berth: On the Rajya Sabha election results**

*The Rajya Sabha elections have allowed dissidents to find their voice*

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 30 of the 56 Rajya Sabha seats which are set to fall vacant in April, from 15 States, with the results announced on February 27. The party won two more seats than what its numbers in the State Assemblies would have allowed, by

brazenly engineering cross voting by legislators from the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and the Congress in Himachal Pradesh. One BJP MLA in Karnataka crossed over to the Congress side. With six MLAs lost to the BJP, who have since been disqualified by the Speaker of the Assembly, the Congress government in Himachal Pradesh is tottering on the edge. Abhishek Manu Singhvi of the Congress and Harsh Mahajan of the BJP got 34 votes each and Mr. Mahajan was declared winner through lots. The Rajya Sabha polls brought the disenchantment within the Congress with Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu out to the fore. Vikramaditya Singh, a rebel Minister, announced his resignation, only to retract his statement. The Congress is making efforts to save its government, but the crisis is far from over. In Uttar Pradesh, seven Samajwadi Party legislators voted for the BJP, leading to the party winning an additional seat. It is not the first time that the BJP has fished in troubled waters to gain an extra berth in the Rajya Sabha. In 2017, Congress strategist Ahmed Patel managed to win by a whisker in Gujarat; and in 2020, the rebellion against the Ashok Gehlot government in Rajasthan happened on the eve of elections to the Upper House.

The BJP now has 97 members in the Upper House, and, along with the allies, is just four short of the majority mark of 121 in the Rajya Sabha, where the current strength is 240. While successive victories in the State elections have helped the BJP improve its position, growing from 78 members in 2019 to 97 at the end of the five years, the party has never shied away from pushing the boundaries of normative politics to increase its strength. The gap between the BJP, the single largest party in the Rajya Sabha, and the Congress, which has just 29 members, is far too wide to be bridged any time soon. The other Opposition parties too have only a limited presence with the Trinamool Congress at 13, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Aam Aadmi Party with 10 each, the Rashtriya Janata Dal with six and the Communist Party of India (M) with five. In past parliamentary sessions, the Opposition members were frequently suspended whenever they sought to question the government, making Parliament a theatre of the government's unilateralism.

**THE HINDU, DELHI 9-3-2024**

**Dubious response: On the State Bank of India and the Electoral Bond scheme**

It has barely been three weeks since a five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court of India unanimously struck down the Electoral Bond scheme as unconstitutional for violating the right to information under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. The scheme, which was notified in 2018, facilitated anonymous political donations. The judgment also stipulated that the State Bank of India

(SBI), the sole bank authorised to issue electoral bonds, had to immediately stop issuing them. It also had to furnish, by March 6, details of the political parties that were recipients besides the purchase details which included the date of purchase and the denomination. The intent in asking the SBI to do so was clear — to ensure transparency in political funding at a time when the general election is due. In its response, the SBI, through one of its functionaries, has sought time till the end of June 2024, which would be well after the expected date of the general election, to release data. The bank's response is curious and difficult to accept. First, it said that it required time to reconcile two silos of information — one related to the purchase of the bonds and the other to the parties that were issued the bonds — and that it was difficult to pinpoint which political party was issued bonds by the relevant donor. This clearly was not the requirement from the top court, which has merely directed the bank to release purchase and issuing information and not to pinpoint the link between donor and recipient.

Second, the response suggests that only the number of bonds issued, and not the KYC details of the purchasers, has been stored digitally, complicating the process of collecting this information. But reports based on RTI queries have found that the bank was indeed storing data on the donors who were purchasing electoral bonds and their dates of purchase. Reports also indicate that the bank issued a unique alphanumeric code to each bond, which should make it relatively easy to gather details on the bonds' issue date and the denomination quickly through database queries. While matching each donor to a party will be tricky, it should be possible to triangulate data on recipient parties and the issuing of bonds as these bonds have to be redeemed by political parties within 15 days. Information that is available in public till March 2023 shows that the Bharatiya Janata Party received 57% of all the money donated through bonds, followed by the Congress, which received close to 10%. In the hearing of the contempt petition filed against the SBI for its response, the Court must compel the bank to get its act together and furnish the information well in time before the election.

#### **THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 8-3-2024**

### **Electoral bonds disclosure: Contempt plea against SBI for 'defying' Supreme Court order**

**Satya Prakash**

**New Delhi,** The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) on Thursday moved the Supreme Court with a contempt petition against the State Bank of India (SBI) for failing to disclose by March 6 details of electoral

bonds encashed by political parties and instead seeking four months for it.

Advocate Prashant Bhushan mentioned the ADR's plea before a Bench led by CJI DY Chandrachud, which agreed to consider it after the petitioner completed the filing formalities. The matter was likely to be taken up on Monday.

Citing "certain practical difficulties", the SBI had on Monday moved the Supreme Court seeking time till June 30 to disclose details of each electoral bond issued and encashed. "The timeline of three weeks fixed by the court in its judgment dated February 15 would not be sufficient for the entire exercise to be completed," the SBI said in an application filed in the top court. In a landmark verdict, a five-judge Constitution Bench led by Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud had on February 15 declared unconstitutional the electoral bonds scheme that allowed individuals and companies to make unlimited anonymous donations to political parties. Acting on a PIL filed by ADR, the top court had ordered the SBI to stop issuing electoral bonds immediately and submit all details by March 6 to the Election Commission which shall make all donations public by March 13.

#### **THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 12-3-2024**

### **Editorial on SBI's reluctance to disclose electoral bond details**

*The State Bank of India's last-minute petition was being seen as defying the court's order and undermining its authority, violating, in effect, the principles of the Constitution*

The autonomy of institutions under the government is a gift of democracy. Events during the last ten years, however, indicate that this autonomy has been undermined, damaging democratic rights. In spite of that, the suggestion that the major nationalised bank in the country is inclined to screen the government from scrutiny and, perhaps, help it in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections is disturbing in a different way because the bank is directly a repository of the people's trust. The Supreme Court annulled the electoral bonds scheme for the funding of political parties in February. Electoral bonds were introduced to preserve the anonymity of donors to political parties. In its ruling, the court called the scheme unconstitutional and directed the State Bank of India, empowered to operate the scheme, to submit details of the donors, amounts and so on to the Election Commission of India by March 6. Two days before the deadline, the SBI asked for an extension to June 30, claiming that recovering the data was a complicated process. The apex court has now, quite correctly, rapped the errant bank on its knuckles, dismissing its appeal for

an extension of the time period and directing it to furnish the details by today.

Two main objections were made to the SBI's argument by two non-governmental organisations that had filed a contempt petition in the Supreme Court and a watchdog group composed of retired bureaucrats, that has written to the ECI. One, that the technical hurdles delaying the retrieval of data cited by the SBI are fictitious — reasons have been given in support — and, two, that the SBI's favoured deadline falls, noticeably, after the Lok Sabha elections. The SBI's last-minute petition was being seen — maybe not just by those who have protested formally — as defying the court's order and undermining its authority, violating, in effect, the principles of the Constitution. It ignores the right to know, by virtue of which, in this case, voters may make fully informed choices. The issue goes to the heart of democratic choice and representation. The retired civil servants' Constitutional Conduct Group mentioned that suppressing donor identities also meant screening the possible granting of favours to them or the pressuring of reluctant ones. Such suspicions are not encouraging for the voter. The CCG has asked the ECI to withhold scheduling the elections till the SBI has disclosed the data required. The chain of events exemplifies the edginess surrounding every event and a sense of disillusion regarding some of the most trusted institutions.

### **THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 8-3-2024**

#### **PM in Kashmir**

*Outreach laudable, but twin challenges remain*

PAYING his first visit to Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reached out to the valley residents with the slogan 'Viksit Bharat Viksit Jammu Kashmir'. His message is clear: the state-turned-UT's development will go hand in hand with that of the country. He launched and dedicated to the nation more than 50 projects worth Rs 6,400 crore, including initiatives in the tourism sector and a project for the integrated development of the Hazratbal shrine in Srinagar.

The PM has asserted that J&K is touching new heights of development and 'breathing freely' after the 2019 abrogation. It goes to the credit of the Union Government and the security forces that the count of terror-related incidents has come down significantly in recent years. The annual death toll — both of civilians and security personnel — has also been waning. No major terror strike has taken place in Kashmir after the Pulwama attack of February 2019. The government has been prioritising development and employment in a bid to keep the youth off the perilous path of violence and extremism.

Amid all these confidence-building measures, there are two major challenges for the Centre: restoring J&K's statehood and holding the Assembly elections. An inordinate delay in undertaking these all-important exercises is sending out the message that all is not well on the ground. This runs contrary to the government's claim that everything is hunky-dory in J&K. The resumption of the electoral process is the need of the hour to regain the trust of political parties and voters. Allowing democracy to wither is a recipe for disaster in a region highly vulnerable to cross-border terrorism. The simmering discontent over perceived disempowerment following the revocation of the special status as well as statehood must be addressed with timely remedial steps.

### **THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 9-3-2024**

#### **Farooq Abdullah questions PM Modi on Article 370, BJP's 'dynasty' charge**

**Adarsh Kumar Gupta**

Former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Farooq Abdullah has questioned Prime Minister Narendra Modi over his criticism of now-abrogated Article 370 which granted special status to the erstwhile state. During his Kashmir visit on Thursday, PM Modi claimed Article 370 was used for political gains and only a few families took advantage of it.

"I am glad that PM visited Kashmir after five years. It is a moment of pride for all of us. This dynastic rule is a kind of common voice I heard also in the Parliament. In every speech that PM makes he makes a particular target on it. If Article 370 was so bad, I would like the Prime Minister to re-hear the speech made in the Rajya Sabha by the then Leader of Opposition Ghulam Nabi Azad in which he compared two states. He compared Gujarat and Jammu and Kashmir in terms of progress when Article 370 was there," said Abdullah on Thursday as quoted by news agency ANI. Criticising PM Modi over his tirade against dynastic rule and his claims of the rise of a "new Jammu and Kashmir" after the abrogation of the now-scrapped constitutional provision, Abdullah said, "Now, if Article 370 and nepotism are responsible, then how did we make that progress? It is the people's rule, I lost the election as a chief minister. So, where is the dynastic rule?"

#### **What PM Modi had said**

In his maiden visit to Kashmir since the abrogation of Article 370 by his government in 2019, PM Modi addressed a public rally in Srinagar's Bakshi stadium on Thursday.

"For decades, for political gains, Congress and its allies misled the people of Jammu and Kashmir in the name of 370 and misled the country. Did Jammu and Kashmir benefit from Article 370 or were only a few political

families taking advantage of it? The people of Jammu and Kashmir have come to know the truth that they were misled. Jammu and Kashmir was kept in chains for the benefit of a few families," said the Prime Minister.

"Today there is no Article 370, hence the talent of the youth of J&K is being fully respected and they are getting new opportunities. Today there are equal rights and equal opportunities for everyone here," he added.

#### **THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 10-3-2024**

### **Former Jammu and Kashmir CM Farooq Abdullah seeks probe into Modi's 370 claims**

*Farooq, who was reacting to Modi's speech in Srinagar on Thursday, said an impartial commission should investigate the claims that the regional parties contributed to Jammu and Kashmir's purported under-development*

**Muzaffar Raina, Srinagar**

Former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Farooq Abdullah has called for an "honest commission" to ascertain the truth in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remark that Article 370 had resulted in misgovernance in the erstwhile state.

Farooq, who was reacting to Modi's speech in Srinagar on Thursday, said an impartial commission should investigate the claims that the regional parties contributed to Jammu and Kashmir's purported under-development.

The National Conference president said Jammu and Kashmir was on a par with developed states such as Gujarat on various fronts.

"Appoint a commission, probe it all with impartiality so that this rhetoric ends forever. Look at the health index, the education sector and the finance sector of Jammu and Kashmir before 370 and investigate it. The truth will come to light," Farooq said in a statement.

"Today, education is only free up to the 14th class. In the universities, you have to pay now. An honest commission has to be put to see what was there before the revocation of Article 370 and what was there thereafter."

Modi had on Thursday said the Congress and its allies had misled the people of Jammu and Kashmir and the country in the name of Article 370. He claimed that Jammu and Kashmir was kept in chains for the benefit of a few families who focused on *parivarvaad* (dynasty) politics and encouraged corruption.

"Today there is no 370, hence the talent of the youth of Jammu and Kashmir is being fully respected and they are getting new opportunities. Today there are equal

rights and equal opportunities for everyone here," Modi had said.

Farooq denied the allegations of dynastic politics and said that the people reject or select their representatives in a democracy .

"Unlike autocracy where leaders are imposed on the populace, in democracy, leaders are chosen through a democratic process," he said.

Talking to the reporters on Saturday, Farooq said the INDIA grouping would rise because it stood for the future of India and its democracy.

The NC president was responding to questions on the growing rift with the Peoples Democratic Party following his decision to deny any seat to the latter in the upcoming parliamentary polls. He said the alliance, like the country, stood for its people.

"India is for all. India is not Pakistan. India's Constitution was framed on these lines. We are all one. How does it matter what religion you have, which language you speak and what is your culture?" he asked.

#### **THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 11-3-2024**

### **Farmers Protest: 9 trains cancelled in Ambala division due to 'rail roko'**

**HT News Desk**

Farmers Protest highlights: Farmers stage sit-in protests on railway tracks, pressing the Centre for a legal guarantee of MSP on all crops.

The farm organisations Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha have announced a 'rail roko' protest on Sunday to press the Centre for their demands. **Where are farmers taking rail roko protest?** According to Sarwan Singh Pandher, a leader from Kisan Mazdoor Morcha, the protesting farmers will stage sit-ins on railway tracks across Punjab, including Ferozepur, Amritsar, Rupnagar, and Gurdaspur districts....Read More

**Who is participating in the rail roko protest?**

The 'rail roko' agitation will witness participation from the Bharti Kisan Union (Ekta Ugrahan), Bharti Kisan Union (Dakaunda-Dhaner), and the Krantikari Kisan Union, affiliated with the Samyukta Kisan Morcha.

While not part of the "Delhi Chalo" call, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha has expressed solidarity with farmers camped at the Shambhu and Khanauri border points.

**Farmers 'Delhi Chalo' march**

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha are leading the "Delhi Chalo" march to push the government to meet farmers' demands, particularly a legal guarantee for Minimum Support Price (MSP) on all crops.

The protesting farmers have established camps at the Shambhu and Khanauri border points on the Punjab-Haryana border after facing hindrances from security forces during their march to Delhi, which commenced on February 13.

### **Why are farmers protesting and what are their demands?**

Farmers are sitting on a widespread protest demanding the Center to acknowledge their list of demands.

- Key demands include legislation ensuring a legal status to MSP for their crops.
- Additionally, they demand implementation of the Swaminathan Commission's recommendations for MSP, pensions for farmers and agricultural workers, and the waiver of farm debts.
- Furthermore, farmers are asking the Center to deliver "justice" for the victims of the Lakhimpur Kheri violence case.

### **THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 14-3-2024**

## **SKM to hold 'mahapanchayat' in Delhi on Thursday; police allow gathering of 5,000 farmers, no tractor-trolleys allowed**

*Three Delhi borders—Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur—witness heavy deployment of paramilitary personnel*

**PTI, New Delhi,** Delhi Police have given permission to farmers to hold their 'Kisan Mazdoor Mahapanchayat' with the condition of gathering not exceeding to 5,000, no tractor-trolleys, no march at the Ramlila Maidan, and made elaborate security arrangements that may lead to a heavy traffic jam in the National Capital on March 14, officials on Wednesday said.

The police have also issued traffic advisory for the commuters to avoid roads leading to central Delhi, they said.

The umbrella body of farmers' organisations, Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), which had spearheaded the 2020-21 farmers' protest at Delhi borders against the three central agri laws, has said they will hold a 'Kisan Mazdoor Mahapanchayat' at the Ramlila Maidan where a resolution will be passed to "intensify the fight" against the policies of the government.

The SKM in a statement issued on Tuesday said that the Delhi Police have given them the NOC for conducting the mahapanchayat at Ramlila Maidan on March 14 and arranging parking space and other basic amenities like water, toilets and ambulance with the support of the municipal administration of Delhi.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (central) M Harsha Vardhan told PTI that farmers are allowed to hold the 'mahapanchayat' with the gathering to not significantly exceed 5,000.

He said the farmers have given them the undertaking where they were asked to not come with tractors, without any weapon and also promised that they will not hold any march in Delhi.

Another police officer said the farmers have also been asked to vacate the ground soon after culmination of their programme after 2.30 pm.

He said strict action may be taken if they don't follow the undertakings and indulge in breaking the law and order in Delhi.

"We hope the SKM leadership will abide by the undertaking they have given to us," the DCP said.

The traffic may be affected in various parts of Delhi due to the farmers gathering at the Ramlila Maidan on Thursday, police said.

According to a Delhi Traffic Police statement, Jawaharlal Nehru Marg, Barakhamba Road, Bahadurshah Zafar Marg, Tolstoy Marg, Asaf Ali Road, Jai Singh Road, Swami Vivekanand Marg, Sansad Marg, Netaji Subhash Marg, Baba Kharag Singh Marg, Minto Road, Ashoka Road, Maharaja Ranjeet Singh flyover, Connaught Circus, Bhavbhuti Marg, DDU Marg and Chaman Lal Marg are likely to be affected due to the farmers gathering in Delhi.

The advisory said the traffic may be diverted on Delhi Gate, Mir Dard Chowk, Ajmeri Gate Chowk, Guru Nanak Chowk, Kamla Market, Paharganj Chowk, Jhandewalan round about, Maharaja Ranjeet Singh flyover from Barakhamba Road to Guru Nanak Chowk, Barakhamba Road, Janpath Road, KG Marg crossing and roundabout of GPO (Gol Post Office) from 6 am on Thursday.

The Delhi traffic police also advised the people going towards ISBT, railway station or airport to carefully plan their travel with sufficient time at hand.

"We appreciate your understanding and your cooperation towards the alleviation of traffic congestion during the above-mentioned period," the advisory said.

The three Delhi borders—Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur—have been witnessing a heavy deployment of paramilitary personnel to stop the ongoing protest of the farmers demanding to march to Delhi.

Hundreds of farmers are still sitting at Punjab-Haryana borders for the past one month.

### **THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 10-3-2024**

## **Voters had no scope to pick candidates of their choice in Jan 7 JS polls: EU**

### **Diplomatic Correspondent**

The European Union (EU) Election Expert Mission has said that the voters did not have the opportunity to fully exercise their democratic right to vote for a diverse range of candidates following a decision by the main opposition party to boycott the elections in the Bangladesh's 12th national polls held in January 7, 2024.

The voters could not actually choose the candidates of their choice as it was merely a contest between Awami Leagues own candidates and its independent candidates, EU Election Expert Mission came up with this evaluation regarding the 12th general election in Bangladesh. The EU released the report on their website on Friday night.

"The seat-sharing agreements between participating political parties, as well as the Awami League engineering a system of internal competition between its own official candidates and independent candidates affiliated with this party, did not offer voters genuine freedom of choice," the EU expert team said. Election Expert Mission has said that the Bangladesh 12th national polls did not meet some internationally recognised standards for a democratic election. Although the exercise of civic and political rights is fundamental for democracy, it was limited in case of the 7 January election.

It mentioned that while the Election Commission (EC) had extensive power, there was a lack of confidence among some stakeholders as to whether the commission could deliver a fair election.

EU also made 21-point recommendations to ensure a free, fair, credible election in compliance with international standards. The EU election experts also stressed more transparency and accountability in the work process of the EC.

Earlier, in July last year, an EU pre-election mission visited Bangladesh and held more than 100 meetings with the stakeholders on the overall electoral environment.

Later in September, the EU informed the EC in a letter that it won send a full-fledged mission to observe the general election in Bangladesh. The letter mainly cited lack of funds as the reason behind this decision.

However, the EU, in its final report, has mentioned lack of proper environment for election observation as the key factor. In particular, the report of the pre-election mission had such indications.

Later, the EU sent a four-member technical team to observe the January 7 election which stayed in Bangladesh for almost two months before and after the election to prepare the report.

"The 2024 parliamentary election in Bangladesh did not meet some key international standards for a democratic election. Civil and political rights, including the freedoms of assembly, association, movement, and speech essential for inclusive and competitive elections, were restricted. Opposition political parties activities were severely limited by judicial proceedings and mass arrests. Voters did not have the opportunity to fully exercise their democratic right to vote for a diverse range of candidates following a decision by the main opposition party to boycott the elections. Seat-sharing

agreements between participating political parties, as well as the Awami League engineering a system of internal competition between its own official candidates and independent candidates affiliated with this party, did not offer voters genuine freedom of choice. The environment for media and civil society was also not conducive to guaranteeing freedom of speech and further limited critical public debate and transparency," the EU election expert mission report stated.

The EU said the pre-election period, as part of a series of opposition demonstrations, a large protest march on October 28, 2023 resulted in serious violence. Subsequently, the civil and political rights environment deteriorated significantly with mass arrests and detention of BNP and alliance party leaders and thousands of supporters.

This has severely restricted the exercise of the freedoms of assembly, association, movement, and speech of opposition parties throughout the election period. With nearly all of the senior leadership incarcerated or evading arrest, the BNPs ability to carry out any political activities was limited by criminal cases pursued in the courts. These moves were widely perceived as part of a strategy to instrumentalize criminal charges to prevent any challenges to the election process.

"Fundamental civil and political rights essential for the conduct of credible democratic elections are enshrined in the Constitution of Bangladesh 1972 and international treaties that Bangladesh is a State Party to. However, the protection of some of these rights is undermined by legislation that unduly restricts the rights to freedom of speech and association," it said.

Voting was conducted in a generally organised and orderly manner. There were some isolated incidents of violence reported on election day. There were also reports by the Election Commission and claims made by candidates of voting irregularities in localised attempts at fraud, including ballot box stuffing. Some of these were dealt with promptly by the Election Commission and returning officers and 25 polling centres were suspended, whilst other incidents were neglected and not adequately investigated.

The EU election experts also made a comprehensive set of detailed recommendations in the report in order to further improve certain areas in the electoral process, including the Representation of the People Order, 1972 could provide increased legal certainty and consistency as well as a more harmonised legal framework in line with international standards for democratic elections. This could be carried out within a process of enactment of a new consolidated law by parliament.

It said that the final turnout published by the election commission was 41.8 per cent. This was marked by wide disparities.



**THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 10-3-2024****JP splits again, Raushan****new faction chief****Staff Correspondent**

Raushan Ershad and Kazi Mamunur Rashid have been elected chairman and secretary general of Jatiyo Party by its council, which officially split the party again.

The party had split five times before.

GM Quader leads a faction of the JP which has 11 MPs in parliament.

The JP's council, held yesterday at city's Institution of Engineers, also made Kazi Firoz Rashid executive chairman and Syed Abu Hossain senior co-chairman of the party.

Besides, Saidur Rahman, Shafiqul Islam Sentu, Rahgir Almahe Saad Ershad, Golam Sarwar Milon and Shunil Suvho Roy were elected co-chairman of the party.

The names of all the central committee members would be announced within three to four days, sources said.

It was announced in the council that Saad Ershad, son of Raushan Ershad, would act the party's chairman in the absence Raushan.

Around five thousand councilors and delegates elected the new leadership and approved the new committee of Jatiyo Party.

Leaders of different political parties including Krishak Sramik Janata League President Kader Siddique, Jatiyo Party (Monju) secretary general Sheikh Shahidul Islam and Bangladesh Islami Front Chairman MA Matin delivered congratulatory speech in the programme.

Diplomats and representatives of different foreign missions in Dhaka were also present at the programme.

The tenure of central executive committee of Jatiyo Party expired in December 2022.

Addressing the council, Raushan said JP would have been lost if the council had not been held. "We would have lost thousands of leaders and activists if the council was not held," she added.

She urged those who left the party to return.

"I don't want to misuse the powers of chairman. I want to decentralise my power," she said.

At present opposition leader GM Quader is chairman of a faction of JP while Mujibul Haque Chunnu is the secretary general.

Raushan in late January relieved JP chairman GM Quader and secretary general Mujibul Haque Chunnu from their post and announced to take charge as the party's chairman.

Raushan, widow of JP founder HM Ershad, made the announcement following Jatiyo Party's debacle in the

January 7 elections in which JP managed to get win in only 11 seats, the party's worst performance since 1991.

Raushan and her son didn't participate in the election due to their conflict with GM Quader over giving nomination.

Many JP leaders blamed GM Quader and Chunnu behind the party's debacle in the election.

GM Quader so far expelled at least 30 leaders including several top leaders of the party like Kazi Firoz Rashid, Abu Hossain Babla and Shunil Suvho Roy centering the January 7 national election.

Meanwhile, JP (Japa) Secretary General Mujibul Haque Chunnu yesterday said JP led by GM Quade is the original Jatiya Party.

"Jatiyo Party remains united under the leadership of GM Quader," he added.

**THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 10-3-2024****Treenamool Jatiya Party floated**

*Dr Abdullah made Chairman, Shamim Ishtiaq SG*

**Staff Correspondent**

A new political party titled, Treenamool Jatiya Party, has been floated in the country by the deprived leaders and supporters of the Jatiya Party.

Partys senior leader Dr Abdullah Al Naser, a former coordinator for Rangpur division, and former Jatiya Chhatra Samaj President Shamim Ishtiaq Chowdhury, also member secretary of Lalmonirhat district Jatiya Party, have been made the Chairman and Secretary General respectively of the new party. At a council of delegation held at Dhaka Reporters Unity Auditorium on Saturday, the new committee of the new organisation was formed.

Later, Abdullah Al Naser declared the names of 101-member central executive committee of the party at a press conference at the same place, according to a party release. In the press conference, Abdullah Al Naser said they will announce the 64 district and 495 upazila committees soon after visiting the districts. The inactive and deprived leaders and activists loyal to former President HM Ershads Jatiya Party will join the party and will play a vital role in the countrys politics.

He assured of strengthening the party and building a corruption-free Bangladesh in future.

Terming Jatiya Party's incumbent Chairman GM Quader as a non-political persons, Secretary General Shamim Ishtiaq said due to his political behaviour the popular Jatiya Party has been divided into many factions.

"If GM Quader hadn contested the January 7 election from Shad Ershads Rangpur-3 seat, the party would not

have been divided. It was a mistake made by GM Quader," he claimed.

## **DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 14-3-2024**

### **Political Speculation Swirls**

#### **Ahead of Elections**

##### **Lakdeve Liyanagama**

Speculation about political alliances and elections were continuing at a frantic pace over the past week as the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)'s chief political strategist Basil Rajapaksa returned to the country and the United National Party (UNP) also launched a public campaign.

Before leaving for the United States to spend time with his family, Rajapaksa was seen in at the SLPP convention in December last year. Businessman turned parliamentarian Dhammika Perera was given pride of place at that convention. Many believed he was being groomed as a Presidential candidate.

However, the SLPP is yet to make a decision regarding a candidate. Firstly, what the party needs to decide is whether it fields a candidate of its own. If it does, it will then have to choose a suitable candidate. Or else, it can also not field a candidate and support President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The latter option is also less than certain. That is because it is unclear whether President Wickremesinghe will contest the elections or not. When asked about this issue he has been non-committal, maintaining that his highest priority is resurrecting Sri Lanka's beleaguered economy.

#### **Rajapaksa return**

It is against such a backdrop that Rajapaksa returned to the country last week. He is reported to have held discussions with President Wickremesinghe. No formal announcement has been made regarding this dialogue but it is understood many issues regarding elections were deliberated on.

This includes consideration about holding an early General Election which is not due until August 2025. It appears that both the UNP and the SLPP are in two minds, grappling with what would be the better option for them and trying to decide which election held first would be advantageous to them.

Both the SLPP and the UNP suffer from the burden of incumbency in the current government. As a result, they are not at the peak of their popularity. The parties are therefore apprehensive that should a Presidential Election be held first, the 'domino effect' favouring the winner could go against them.

Alternatively, if the General Election was held first, President Wickremesinghe will remain in office until at

least October this year, when Presidential Elections are due. Therefore, he will be in a position to form the next government with the co-operation of several political parties if necessary.

There is a school of thought, particularly in sections of the SLPP, that this is a better option. They feel President Wickremesinghe will be in a position to form such a coalition government incorporating those from the SLPP, UNP and even some members of the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB).

#### **General election opportunity**

The faction within the SLPP which favour this approach argue that, if such a government is formed by President Wickremesinghe after a general election, it could give his chances of re-election at a presidential election a significant boost as the 'domino effect' would then work to his advantage.

It is unclear at this stage whether President Wickremesinghe would be agreeable to such an exercise. This is also in context of an assurance he gave SLPP parliamentarians when he was seeking their support to be elected President by Parliament. He assured he would not dissolve Parliament early.

There is provision in the Constitution to dissolve Parliament early in two ways. One is for the President to exercise the powers vested in him by the Constitution to dissolve Parliament. The other is for Parliament to pass a resolution to dissolve itself before the end of its term by a simple majority.

In theory at least, even if President Wickremesinghe does not agree to dissolve Parliament, the SLPP which still enjoys a simple majority in Parliament could force the President's hand by passing such a resolution. However, the emphasis now is for the President and the SLPP to seek a consensus.

#### **Compulsory polls**

It must also be noted that, regardless of the decision regarding an early general election, the Constitution mandates the conduct of a presidential election this year. This poll must be held between mid-September and mid-October at a date that will be determined by the Elections Commission.

It was amidst these crucial decision-making exercises that the UNP last week launched what appears to be its election campaign, regardless of whether it targets a general election or presidential election. It was held at Kuliyaipitiya and organised by former Minister of Education Akila Viraj Kariyawasam.

That the meeting drew large crowds would have been a source of comfort for the UNP which has finally entered the campaign trail after being dormant for a few years in contrast to parties such as the SLPP, SJB and the Jathika Jana Balavegaya (JJB) which have held regular political rallies.

It will be recalled that the UNP suffered its worst ever electoral defeat at the August 2020 general election. It received just over 2 per cent of the national vote and less than 250,000 votes countrywide. This was after most of its stalwarts defected to form the SJB which won a commendable 54 seats.

This disastrous performance by the party meant that it was entitled to only a solitary National List seat. However, after a few months during which that seat was not filled by the party, Ranil Wickremesinghe, as party leader filled the vacancy, which propelled him to the Presidency in 2022.

At Kuliyaipitiya, President Wickremesinghe seemed to be wooing supporters of the SJB, being critical of SJB leader Sajith Premadasa. “Sajith Premadasa is ignoring members of his party and is listening to outsiders,” the President said in a reference to the entry of former SLPP stalwarts to the SJB.

“Dr. Harsha De Silva requested me to involve the Opposition in the debt restructuring process. I invited the SJB to join us in meeting the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, Premadasa informed me that his party is not willing to participate in those meetings,” the President said.

“It was parliamentarian G.L. Peiris who has encouraged Premadasa to ignore my request. Premadasa has actually begun to ignore his own party members. The SJB is controlled by outsiders. Therefore, I invite those who opposed me in the past to join us,” the President Wickremesinghe said.

#### **UNP political campaign**

Whether the UNP can sustain the momentum of its campaign in the coming months remains to be seen. In terms of the visibility of their political campaigns, the JJB has a head-start over its rivals, followed by the SJB. The SLPP has held a few rallies but hasn't recorded a successful series as yet.

The other event of some political significance last week was the launch of a book by former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Titled ‘The Conspiracy to oust me from the Presidency’ it is an autobiographical account of the tumultuous events that led to Rajapaksa's resignation in July 2022.

The book took political circles by surprise. Its publication appears to have been a closely guarded secret. There was no advance publicity until the book hit bookstores last week without any prearranged publicity. If that was a marketing strategy, it appears to have paid handsome dividends.

Social media was saturated with comments about the book, the first edition of which was reportedly sold out within hours. In it, Rajapaksa presents his version of events and provides some reasons for the decisions he

made as President. It also provides a ringside view of the events in mid-2022.

#### **Gotabaya's memoir**

There have been some suggestions that former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa – the first Sri Lankan President to write a memoir in addition to being the first Sri Lankan President to resign – is planning a comeback to politics and that the book was a first step in this direction but this is highly unlikely.

Former President Rajapaksa has made every attempt to keep out of the limelight since his retirement and has not made any public comments on the events that led to his resignation. He has remained silent even when the Supreme Court made a determination that his actions led to the economic crisis.

As such his book, published both in Sinhala and English, is no more than an attempt to provide his perspective of events during his Presidency and ‘set the record straight’ on certain controversial issues and incidents, his associates say. They do not believe he will return to politics in the future.

Thus ended yet another hectic week in the Sri Lankan political arena. There is likely to be more of the same in coming months and all eyes will now be focused on the SLPP and the UNP – as to whether they will strike an unprecedented partnership or go it alone at the next national elections.

### **DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 11-3-2024**

#### **The Sajith, AKD no-show**

Both, Opposition and Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) Leader Sajith Premadasa and National People's Power (NPP) Leader Anura Kumara Disسانayake (AKD) have turned down an invitation extended by President Ranil Wickremesinghe to be present at a discussion he will have with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) delegation now in Sri Lanka. Both are on record as having said that they would re-negotiate the current deal between the Government and the IMF, upon assuming office. The meeting was slated to be held at the Presidential Secretariat today.

The initiative followed a request made by SJB MP Dr. Harsha De Silva in Parliament which prompted the President to extend the invitation to all recognized political parties to collaborate with the Government in navigating the challenges posed by the IMF program. The refusal by Premadasa also exposes the divide within his own camp on economic policy (Dr. De Silva is virtually the spokesman on economic affairs for the SJB).

Both Premadasa and AKD have been vocal critics of the IMF deal entered into by the Government and as mentioned, have declared that they would re-negotiate

the pact. Well, they had been given the opportunity to thrash out the details now and they should seize the opportunity now instead of waiting until they come to power one day.

This way the public will be provided with the opportunity to know about their stance on the matter and be better educated when the voting time comes. Going by their own admission, both Premadasa and AKD are not opposed to dealing with the IMF. They wish to differ only with regard to the details.

This is indeed a welcome shift, particularly with regard to Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) which at one time opposed all dealings with the West and labelled the UNP as being pro-Western. Now we see the JVP leader undertaking a visit to Canada following his journey to India. This is indeed a welcome development and perhaps in keeping with the party's declaration that they have departed from the past.

On the other hand, Premadasa had never professed himself to be anti-West and this is indeed why he should have met with the IMF delegation and cleared all his doubts. Not doing so will now expose him as an indecisive leader, which would not do any favour to his electoral prospects. Besides, he together with AKD will now not be in a position to criticise the IMF deal in public having not availed themselves of the opportunity to question the agreement in person with IMF and Government officials.

President Wickremesinghe has underscored the critical importance of successfully advancing the IMF programme for the country's reconstruction. Ideally the presence of Premadasa and AKD would have helped straighten out matters by clearing all doubts and paving the way for the program to continue smoothly even under a different regime.

Now with their non-participation such an eventuality could be in jeopardy. It is still not too late for the duo to change their minds. After all, what is at stake is the country's economic future. Sri Lanka needs all the assistance it could muster to come out of the economic chaos it has been placed in.

The economy has certainly improved under the President's leadership. But we are by no means still out of the woods. Hence, this is not the time to play political games and all parties must unite to secure the country's future. Both Premadasa and AKD who aspire to lead this country someday would not want to inherit a country facing economic doldrums.

## **DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 6-3-2024**

### **SLPP founder returns**

Former Finance Minister and SLPP founder Basil Rajapaksa returned to the country from the United States yesterday morning.

A group of members of Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) were at the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) in Katunayake to welcome him. Picture by T. K. G. Kapila

## **THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 2-3-2024**

### **Ruling alliance is here to stay, Nepali Congress leaders say**

*Congress leaders dismiss rumours that Maoists will betray the coalition by staking claim to Assembly chair at the UML's instigation.*

#### **Post Report**

Amid a divergence of views over the fate of the ruling alliance, top leaders of the Nepali Congress appear confident that their coalition with the Maoist Centre will continue till the completion of the House of Representatives' five-year tenure.

Lately, the ruling alliance led by the Congress and the Maoist Centre looks fractured with the prime minister's party claiming the National Assembly chair, which the Congress hopes will go to one of its members.

The January Assembly election results in Koshi Province and some of the proposals tabled and endorsed by the Congress Mahasamiti meeting and the petition signed for the restoration of the Hindu state by a party faction have given rise to distrust between the key ruling partners.

The rift between the largest and third largest parties in the House widened after the Maoists decided to field their own candidate for the Assembly chair.

"We forged an alliance ahead of the elections and formed the government, which will complete its full term," said Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba in Chitwan on Friday. The coalition would continue until Parliament's five-year tenure is over, he added.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal, whose CPN (Unified Socialist) is also a part of the ruling coalition, heard Deuba's statement and none countered it.

After the Standing Committee of the Maoist Centre decided to field the party's candidate for the Assembly chair, misunderstanding grew within the ruling coalition. Congress leaders have claimed that after a "gentleman's accord" between the Nepali Congress and the Maoist Centre, their senior leader Krishna Prasad Sitaula decided to contest a National Assembly seat from Koshi and won it. There was also an understanding to forward a common candidate, possibly Sitaula, for the Assembly chair on the alliance's behalf.

After the Maoist Centre announced to field its own candidate for the top post, no meeting between the ruling partners has convened to discuss and address the misunderstanding. By early next week, top leaders of

the alliance will sit and discuss the issue, a Congress office bearer said.

There is also a proposal from the prime minister to remove Cabinet ministers accused of financial irregularities and those who are not performing well, the office bearer said. "The issue of Cabinet reshuffle and National Assembly chair will be sorted out together."

Congress Vice-president Purna Bahadur Khadka, who is also the deputy prime minister and minister for defence, is coordinating with Prime Minister Dahal, and some back-channel discussions are going on, the office bearer added.

"Some CPN-UML leaders are trying to fish in the troubled waters after some issues surfaced between us. The Maoists have full right to announce their candidate and some UML and Maoist leaders might be in contact as the UML is hell-bent on breaking up this alliance. But that will not make a difference," said the Congress leader.

Khadka seems confident that the ruling coalition will continue for the remaining nearly four years. Inaugurating the Karnali International Film Festival on Friday, Khadka said there were concerns that the ruling alliance may meet with an accident.

"That's not going to happen," the minister said, claiming that there would be a common candidate from the ruling alliance for the Assembly chair. "This coalition was not formed to betray the people. We went to the public promising to serve the nation and bring about development and prosperity."

Devendra Poudel, a secretary of the Maoist Centre, said he sees no immediate threat against the alliance. "Our decision to field our own candidate has created political gossip but leaders of the ruling alliance will sit soon and resolve the issue between them," he said.

#### **THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 5-3-2024**

### **New coalition partners cement comradeship with 8-point deal**

*Maoist Centre to get upper house chair. PM's post to be divided between Dahal and Oli.*

#### **BINOD GHIMIRE**

**KATHMANDU**, In a dramatic political development, the year-long Nepali Congress and CPN (Maoist Centre) coalition collapsed on Monday, with Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal joining hands with the CPN-UML to revive the "left alliance."

Despite contesting the elections in a pre-poll alliance with the Congress, the Maoist Centre Chairman Dahal had become prime minister on December 26, 2022 with the UML's support. But the partnership couldn't last long after his party decided to

support the Congress in the presidential election. The UML had pulled out of the government on February 27 last year.

Exactly a year later, Dahal changed his coalition partner to side with the UML again and restructured his Cabinet. He has inducted a minister each from his party, the UML and the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP). Hit Bahadur Tamang from the Maoist Centre, UML's Padam Giri and Dol Prasad Aryal of the RSP have become ministers in the Dahal Cabinet. President Ramchandra Paudel administered them oath of office and secrecy as ministers without portfolio. Their ministerial portfolios will be assigned later, as per the statement from the President's Office.

The Dahal-led four-member Cabinet was constituted, relieving all ministers of their responsibilities. The Congress ministers didn't resign, waiting for the prime minister to sack them. They argue that it was the Maoist Centre that broke the alliance, not them. Dahal has for now kept all the ministries with him.

A meeting of the top leaders of the Maoist Centre, UML, RSP and Janata Samajbadi Party has decided not to include the fifth largest party in the lower house, the Rastriya Prajatantra Party, in the ruling alliance, citing the party's advocacy for a Hindu kingdom. They also have forged an eight-point deal signed by Dahal along with UML chair KP Sharma Oli, RSP chairperson Rabi Lamichhane and Samajbadi Party chief Upendra Yadav.

"The [new] coalition has been formed among like-minded parties for good governance, development, social justice and prosperity. The government will be led by Maoist Centre chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal," reads the first point of the agreement. The four parties have agreed to support the Maoist Centre in the election of National Assembly chair while they will back a UML candidate for vice-chair of the upper house.

The position of upper house chair has fallen vacant after Ganesh Timilsina, who was elected from the UML, completed his six-year term on Sunday. The election for the chair has been slated for March 12.

Urmila Aryal, elected from the Maoist Centre, holds the vice-chair position. As the constitution doesn't allow lawmakers from the same party to hold both the positions, Aryal will have to quit before the Maoist Centre fields its candidate for chairperson. It is possible that either Aryal or Jhakku Prasad Subedi will be the chairperson candidate from the Maoist Centre. With 17 seats, the Maoist Centre is the largest party in the upper house.

Sharing of the ministries on mutual agreement based on the specialities is another point the parties have agreed upon.

Deuba and Congress Vice-president Purna Bahadur Khadka, an outgoing deputy prime minister, were said to be in regular touch with Dahal and they had

reportedly assured him that the Congress would support the Maoist bid for National Assembly chair, and also offered both the home and finance ministries. “But Dahal declined Deuba’s offer,” a Congress office bearer said. “He had already made up his mind to betray us.”

Ganesh Shah, secretary of the Maoist Centre, quoted Dahal as saying that the Congress’ reluctance to remove finance minister Mahat and health minister Mohan Bahadur Basnet, who faces corruption charges, had driven a big wedge between the two parties.

“I pushed for several initiatives for economic reform, but the finance minister declined them all, leading to growing frustration among the people,” said the prime minister. “I found the UML’ s proposal of leftist unity encouraging, so I decided to sever ties with the Congress.”

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“I pushed for several initiatives for economic reform, but the finance minister declined them all, leading to growing frustration among the people,” said the prime minister. “I found the UML’ s proposal of leftist unity encouraging, so I decided to sever ties with the Congress.”

Dahal on Monday said that no one can manipulate him and his party.

“No reactionary forces can use me,” he said at an event on Monday. “Some reactionary forces call me unpredictable, but they could still not use me. If anyone tries to trap me, I have the ability to kick my way out,” said Dahal.

CPN (Unified Socialist) spokesman Jagannath Khatiwada said the Maoist Centre and the Congress were in dispute over foreign and economic policies. “The prime minister used to feel trapped by the Congress. Oli’s design has worked again.”

But the Unified Socialist, a member of the outgoing coalition, is reluctant to join the new one.

“After the Nepali Congress decided to contest elections independently, the Maoists needed new political support, which it got from the UML. This is in preparation for the next elections [three years away]. Second, the rift between Dahal and Deuba was

widening over the issue of finance minister Mahat. These were the major reasons why the coalition collapsed,” said Khatiwada.

On the other hand, Deuba on Monday said that he kept ignoring Oli’s overtures fearing that such meetings would impact the ruling alliance. During a meeting of the party’s former and sitting office bearers, he said Oli would call him twice a day for meetings, but he refused to meet the UML chief due to concerns about the coalition’s fate.

“I was ready to surrender everything, but Dahal still betrayed me. His intention was to betray me. Dahal is now saying that the Nepali Congress did not allow him to reshuffle the Cabinet, which is not true. If not today, he would have betrayed me some other time,” said the office bearer quoting Deuba.

“This development did not happen overnight,” Deuba said at the meeting. “It is the result of over six months of talks between Dahal and Oli.”

“Their intent is to bring communist parties together, and so there is also an external factor,” the office bearer said.

But Maoist Centre secretary Devendra Poudel ruled out any role of external actors behind the formation of the new political equation between UML and the Maoist Centre.

Some Congress leaders hinted at Chinese hand behind the two communist parties coming together again, something the northern neighbour has long encouraged.

“That is not true,” said Poudel.

“We took this step to complete the unfinished tasks of the Nepal Communist Party.” The NCP was formed in 2019 after a merger between the UML and Maoist Centre, but dissolved in 2021 by a Supreme Court verdict.

Khatiwada also ruled out Chinese involvement. “Had the Chinese been behind this, we would definitely know,” said Khatiwada. “The Chinese always encourage left unity, but they don’t insist on it.”

#### **THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 8-3-2024**

### **Dahal blames Congress to justify new alliance**

*‘This is not called flexibility. This is political dishonesty,’ says the Congress chief whip about the prime minister’s frequent changes of alliances.*

#### **Post Report**

**KATHMANDU**, Three days after constituting a new ruling coalition, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal has blamed the Nepali Congress for compelling him to break the yearlong alliance with the party.

Addressing the House of Representatives on Thursday, Dahal said he could not perform as he wanted under the previous alliance, which prompted him to seek new coalition partners.

“I repeatedly said that I was not satisfied with the government’s pace,” he said. I had two options: First, to lead an average and ad hoc government holding on to the prime ministerial position, and second, to risk the position for nation-building as per my political commitment. I chose the second.”

In internal meetings, Dahal had accused some ministers from the Congress of non-cooperation. He was particularly unhappy with Prakash Sharan Mahat, the immediate past finance minister, for refusing to act as he wanted. While thanking the Nepali

Congress leadership for trusting him as prime minister, Dahal also said he was in the top job for the third time to perform, not just for the sake of leading a government. He added he couldn’t perform as expected because his partners were not comfortable working with.

The prime minister said the Congress didn’t reciprocate the support it received to his party, the Maoist Centre. The third-largest party had won 36 seats under the first-past-the-post category in the 2017 federal elections when it had partnered with the CPN-UML. But the seats halved to 18 when it partnered with the Congress and other parties in 2022.

In his address, the Maoist Centre supremo also reminded his former coalition partner that it refused to hand over the government’s leadership to his party after the election. With the then Prime Minister and Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba reluctant to hand over the position, the Maoist Centre formed a coalition with the UML in the last week of December 2022, though it only lasted a couple of months until the presidential election.

Dahal also revealed his dissatisfaction over the revolt of the Congress provincial assembly members in Koshi, which barred his party’s candidate Indra Bahadur Angbo from becoming the chief minister. Kedar Karki, a Congress leader from a dissident faction of the party, became the chief minister though Angbo was the official candidate of the ruling parties. “The move, which must have been liable for action from the party, was rather rewarded,” said Dahal, adding that his party’s candidate from Koshi was defeated due to betrayal from the Congress.

Maoist Centre’s Champa Karki, a common candidate of the then ruling alliance, was defeated by the UML’s Rukmini Koirala after some Congress voters did not vote along the official line.

The political paper presented in last month’s Mahasamiti meeting of the Congress, which said the Maoist violence was unnecessary, was another factor

that prompted the divorce, according to Dahal. In addition, the prime minister said that the move of some Congress leaders to campaign for a Hindu state during the Mahasamiti meeting had given ample room to suspect the party’s commitment to the constitution. Over 1,100 Congress members signed a petition for reinstating Nepal as a Hindu state during the Mahasamiti meeting, which is considered the party’s major policy-making body.

The Congress, however, rubbished Dahal’s allegations as a non-issue. It also said Dahal raised the issues, which were already settled, to justify his unprincipled move. The party has even called Dahal a betrayer who lacks political honesty.

Addressing the House meeting, Ramesh Lekhak, the Congress chief whip, said Dahal had betrayed all the parties—not once but multiple times. “You [Dahal] betrayed not only us but other parties as well,” Lekhak said. “Just imagine what your fate would be if all those that you betrayed came together against you.”

He reminded Dahal and his party that they had contested the election together, promising voters they’d continue the alliance for five years. “The unilateral dissolution of the alliance was also a betrayal to the people who voted for you,” Lekhak said, addressing Dahal.

Lekhak reminded Dahal that he had already formed and broken alliances three times in the 14 months since the 2022 elections. “At the current pace, he can constitute and break the alliance 12 times in the four years until the next election,” Lekhak said. “This is not called flexibility. This is political dishonesty, which people are watching very closely.”

A meeting of the Congress parliamentary party held on the day announced that the party had withdrawn its support to Dahal.

The prime minister said he would elaborate on why the new coalition was formed when he seeks Parliament’s trust within a month. Leaders from other ruling parties, who spoke in the House meeting, said the new coalition will last until the elections four years away.

### **TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 3-3-2024**

## **Iranian election results: shift towards independent candidates**

**By Sadegh Fereydounabadi**

**TEHRAN** - As the vote counting process nears completion nationwide in Iran, following Friday’s active participation at polling stations, it seems that citizens have shown a preference for individual candidates over coalitions endorsed by well-known politicians.

In the capital city, Tehran, initial results indicated a potential decline in popularity for Parliament Speaker

Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, who finds himself ranked fourth among candidates with the highest vote counts.

Notably, Mahmoud Nabavian, a cleric and incumbent MP, has emerged as the top vote-getter. The 58-year-old is believed to be a conservative politician.

Tehran's election outcomes also reveal the election of new faces to Parliament. Among them, 35-year-old Ph.D. holder and former political show anchor, Amir Hossein Sabeti, secured the third-highest number of votes in the capital.

During this election cycle, some prominent figures, such as Mohammad Bagher Nobakht, a key reformist candidate and former vice president, faced voter disapproval. Nobakht was not chosen as a representative by the people in his hometown Rasht. Analysts believe Nobakht's tenure as the head of the Plan and Budget Organization from 2016 to 2021 which drew significant criticism was the main reason for his lack of success.

Apart from casting votes for the 290-seat parliament, Iranians also elected the 88 members for the Assembly of Experts. President Ebrahim Raisi achieved a decisive victory in South Khorasan Province, securing over 80% of the votes. This win establishes a new record for the candidate with the highest number of votes in the Assembly of Experts.

#### **Iranians disappointed enemies**

Iran's president has thanked the Iranian people for disappointing enemies and showing up at the ballot box on Friday in a glorious display of national unity.

Raisi made the remarks in a letter addressed to the people of Iran on Saturday.

"People showed up and said 'No' to global arrogance. This was a defeat for anti-human forces who tried to wreak havoc in our country through various seditions last year," the president wrote.

Figures show that over 25 million people cast their votes on March 1, meaning over 40% of eligible voters decided to take part in the election. The 2020 legislative elections had the same turnout rates.

"The ill-wishers of our beloved country had mobilized all their power to make the March 1 vote lackluster," Raisi added, pointing out how vast Western propaganda campaigns tried to discourage people from exercising their voting rights weeks before the election.

The Iranian Parliament Speaker has also appreciated the impressive turnout of Iranians from all walks of life in the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections.

In a message on Saturday, the speaker applauds the widespread participation of the people which can preserve Iran's deterrence power against political, economic, and even military pressures from enemies.

"It is my duty to humbly thank the beloved and responsible people of the Islamic Republic of Iran who,

with their extensive participation in the elections, have preserved the deterrence power of our country Iran against political, economic, and even military pressures from enemies," he added.

Ghalibaf mentioned in this message that "the value of this presence becomes clear when we note that this participation has been under economic pressures and various cognitive warfare methods by the enemy to reduce participation."

He further stated that Iranians have participated in the elections with exemplary enthusiasm and sacrifice, based on their belief in the principles of the Islamic establishment.

"The high turnout of the Iranian nation sent a great message to foes that they support such a divine Revolution," Ghalibaf continued.

The parliament speaker also emphasized that "it is our duty as officials to recognize such susceptibilities and then do our best to solve people's problems."

### **TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 6-3-2024**

#### **March 1 polls fueled by patriotism and political awareness: speaker**

**TEHRAN-** The speaker of Iran's Parliament emphasizes the significance of engagement in Friday's elections, noting an increase in participation driven by patriotism, civic interest, national security concerns, and political awareness despite perceived external challenges.

Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, speaking on Tuesday, underscored the robust turnout in both parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections, expressing gratitude towards the Iranian populace and election officials for their contributions to the democratic process.

He specifically lauded the efforts of security and police forces for their astute management in ensuring the elections' security.

Echoing similar sentiments, the chief Army commander Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi, lauded the coordinated efforts of the ground, naval, and aerial forces, alongside defense authorities, in facilitating the smooth conduct of the elections. He extended appreciation to national organizations and institutions for their pivotal roles in maintaining security during this crucial electoral period.

Major General Mousavi recognized the unwavering dedication of commanders and soldiers, whose vigilant involvement was integral to upholding security. Additionally, he praised border commanders for their proactive measures in safeguarding the territorial integrity in the run-up to the elections.

In his address, Speaker Ghalibaf emphasized the accountability of parliament representatives to all



constituents, urging them to prioritize public interests over partisan agendas.

Highlighting the importance of economic and political stability in bolstering voter participation, Ghalibaf emphasized the symbolic adherence of voters to the Islamic Republic system, citing the electoral process as a vital avenue for addressing challenges.

Ghalibaf stressed the imperative of cooperation between the legislative and executive branches, cautioning against discord and polarization.

"We have fortified collaborative efforts between the government and parliament to advance the people's interests within the Seventh National Development Plan," reiterated the parliament speaker.

Expressing gratitude to outgoing parliament representatives, Ghalibaf concluded, "We have pledged to honor the privilege of public participation on the path of progress, as guided by our wise and esteemed leader."

On Monday, Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi revealed that the turnout in the elections stood at 41%, with approximately 25 million individuals participating, including a 5% count of blank votes.

In a press conference held on Monday evening, Minister Vahidi lauded the successful conduct of both the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections, stating that it brought joy to supporters of democracy while stirring resentment among detractors.

He emphasized the resilience of the Iranian people, who defied attempts by hostile forces to dampen enthusiasm and suppress voter turnout.

Vahidi commended the Leader of the Islamic Revolution for his guidance during the election process, crediting Ayatollah Khamenei's principles with steering the nation in the right direction.

He highlighted the exemplary security measures implemented during the elections, despite efforts by adversaries to disrupt proceedings, asserting that the nation's enemies suffered a significant setback in their attempts to sow chaos.

Regarding the integrity of the elections, Vahidi stressed that the country adhered to the highest transparency, ensuring meticulous attention to every vote cast.

He expressed gratitude to all involved for their efforts in upholding these standards, acknowledging the challenging circumstances, including adverse weather conditions and external threats, that were overcome to facilitate the participation of 25 million voters.

The minister applauded the robust competition among candidates representing various political factions, underscoring the diversity of voices that contributed to the democratic process.

He noted an increase in voter turnout compared to previous elections, despite the challenges faced, and extended congratulations to the newly elected members of parliament and the Assembly of Experts.

### **TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 6-3-2024**

## **45 parliamentary seats will be decided in run-off election**

**TEHRAN** - In an interview with reporters on Monday, Mohsen Eslami, the spokesperson for the election headquarters, provided details on the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections held on March 1.

Eslami announced that as results show, 45 seats in the 290-seat parliament will be decided in the run-off elections. He said candidates who have failed to win less than 20 percent of the votes will be competing again in the spring to determine who will win the vacant seats.

According to the election law, two candidates will compete for each remaining seat.

However, all 88 seats for the Assembly of Experts were filled in the Friday elections.

In terms of voter participation, 48% were women and 52% were men, with 85% using their national ID cards to vote. This year for the first time since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran allowed voters to use various identification documents to vote. Before the latest round of elections, people were only allowed to cast votes by identification booklets (Shenasnameh).

Eslami shared insights into the composition of the newly elected members of the parliament: 52 individuals aged 30 to 45 represent 21% of the assembly, 135 individuals aged 45 to 60 make up 55%, and the remaining members, aged 60 to 75, form the composition of the future legislative body.

Moreover, 37% of the winners hold doctoral degrees, 58% master's degrees, and the rest have theological qualifications. Among them, 103 have served as representatives, while 143 are new to this position.

The competition was mainly between three political factions.

While the exact percentage that each faction has won is yet to be determined, the existing lists show that all political factions fielded candidates.

Two principlist groups, a moderate faction and independents competed in the elections.

Also, electronic voting took place in Qom, Rasht, Khomein, Malayer, and Abadan for the first time, boasting good accuracy, precision, and speed.

### **Iranians showed resilience against seditions**

The Secretary of the Assembly of Experts on Tuesday emphasized the resilience of the Iranian people against

propaganda campaigns targeting the Friday elections. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati urged the country's officials not to take people's support for granted and act concertedly to tackle national issues.

Ayatollah Jannati decided not to compete for a new term in the Assembly of Experts. He, however, will continue to serve as the secretary of the Guardian Council.

### **DAWN, ISLAMABAD 8-3-2024**

#### **Asif Zardari sworn in as 14<sup>th</sup> president of Pakistan**

PPP co-chairman Asif Zardari was sworn in as the 14th President of Pakistan on Sunday, officially taking over as the head of the state for a historic second time after winning a one-sided presidential election a day earlier.

Zardari had secured 411 electoral votes on Saturday to defeat his opponent and chief of the Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), Mehmood Khan Achakzai, who could only bag a total of 181 electoral votes, according to the Election Commission of Pakistan.

Chief Justice of Pakistan Qazi Faez Isa administered the oath to Zardari today at the President's House in Islamabad. They were flanked by newly elected Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and outgoing President Dr Arif Alvi.

Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee General Sahir Shamshad Mirza were also in attendance, while PPP chief Bilawal Bhutto Zardari was seated next to them.

Many other political leaders, including former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq, former federal ministers Sherry Rehman, Syed Naveed Qamar, Khursheed Ali Shah and Ishaq Dar, Sindh and Balochistan Chief Ministers Syed Murad Ali Shah and Sarfraz Bugti, Sindh and Punjab Governors Kamran Tessori and Baligur Rehman also attended the ceremony.

From Zardari's family, his daughters Aseefa Bhutto Zardari and Bakhtawar Bhutto Zardari, along with her husband and Zardari's sister Faryal Talpur were also in attendance.

Zardari is the only individual to have been elected as head of the state for a second time and one of the four democratically elected presidents to have completed their five-year constitutional term.

Nominated as the joint candidate of the PML-N-led coalition government under a quid pro quo deal that saw PML-N president Shehbaz being elected as prime minister, Zardari will replace Dr Arif Alvi, who overstayed for five months in the absence of electoral

college required to elect a new president after completing his five-year term in September 2023.

### **PAKISTAN TODAY, ISLAMABAD 4-3-2024**

#### **New PM elected**

*Shehbaz Sharif's election the start of a new era or a return to the past?*

As expected, Mian Shehbaz Sharif won the election for Prime Minister as the National Assembly gave him 201 votes, versus 92 for Gohar Ayub. That amounts to a two-thirds majority, but is still short of the requirement of 224, making the total membership of the House. Still, it is within striking distance, and the majority is a striking improvement on Mian Shehbaz's wafer-thin majority during his previous government, when he had just the bare minimum. The PTI/Sunni ittehad Council took part in the election, despite its reservations about the 23 reserved seats it is claiming, but which the Election Commission has still not given. Even if those seats were indeed filled, other seats would be left vacant, such as one where a candidate died, or where one person (like the new PM himself) had won more than one seat. Still, the Mian Shehbaz government faces two great tests soon, and will depend on the 70 seats of the PPP to achieve at least one of them.

The first test will be to negotiate a new package with the IMF. The present Standby Arrangement was negotiated by Mian Shahbaz when he led the PDM coalition that replaced the PTI, and the caretakers merely implemented it. IMF programmes have grown in importance ever since friendly countries, notably China and Saudi Arabia, have made an IMF programme a condition for lending to Pakistan. The second test will be to pass a budget incorporating the promises made for the new package. For that, it will need PPP support. The PPP's 70 MNAs voted for Mian Shehbaz, but the party has not accepted any Cabinet positions, and insists it will support the government from the outside. It will wait until Asif Zardari is re-elected President before it does anything about its support. The refusal by the JUI(F) to support the new PM is also not a good omen.

The new government is beset by many challenges right from the get-go. Attention has now shifted to cabinet formations, which will then be succeeded by the hurlyburly surrounding the presidential election on March 9, and then by jostling for party tickets in the coming Senate elections. The PM's initial speech sounded the right notes and showed an awareness of the economic problems facing the common man, but did not indicate any major steps which would change things. It is to be hoped that this awareness is not dulled by the politics involved in keeping his coalition together.

<b>ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS</b>				
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2.	India to grow at 6.8 pc in FY'25, to become upper middle-income country by 2031: Crisil Ratings - PTI	The Tribune, Chandigarh	7-3-2024	38
3.	Express View on India's GDP: Reading the spike Editorial	The Indian Express, New Delhi	1-3-2024	39
4.	India-Bhutan Buddhist fest ends near Tawang - Tribune News Service <b>Inflation</b>	The Tribune, Chandigarh	11-3-2024	39
5.	Is India overestimating food inflation? By Zia Haq	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	2-3-2024	40
6.	Consumption trends and monetary policy By Janak Raj <b>Poverty Paradox</b>	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	4-3-2024	40
7.	Extreme poverty nearly eliminated in India, says World Poverty Clock By Aditi Tandon	The Tribune, Chandigarh	3-3-2024	42
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9.	There are no poor in India By P Chidambaram <b>BANGLADESH</b> <b>International Trade and Cooperation</b>	The Indian Express, New Delhi	4-3-2024	43
10.	Trade with India in Rupee faces setback	The Daily Observer, Dhaka	1-3-2024	44
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12.	BD agrees to buy hydro-power from Nepal at 6.5 cents per unit By Shahnaj Begum <b>SRI LANKA</b> <b>Economic Recovery</b>	The Daily Observer, Dhaka	13-3-2024	45
13.	"Economic recovery to continue in 2024"	Daily News, Colombo	12-3-2024	46
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15.	Sri Lanka signs two agri sector agreements with Bangladesh	Daily News, Colombo	14-3-2024	47
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17.	Talks to resolve India-Sri Lanka fisheries issue By Dinuli Francisco <b>NEPAL</b> <b>International Trade and Cooperation</b>	Sunday Observer, Colombo	1-3-2024	48
18.	Experts stress strong foreign policy tools to promote Nepal's trade - Post Report	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	13-3-2024	48
19.	Crucial section of Koshi Corridor Transmission Line completed - Post Report <b>IRAN</b> <b>International Trade and Cooperation</b>	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	11-3-2024	49
20.	Iran, Russia sign document on health cooperation - MT/MG	Tehran Times, Tehran	2-3-2024	49
21.	Tehran, Tashkent explore avenues of economic cooperation By Ebrahim Fallahi <b>PAKISTAN</b>	Tehran Times, Tehran	7-3-2024	50
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23.	Pak-China cooperation to explore chemical industry digitalisation - Agencies <b>CHINA</b>	The Nation, Islamabad	4-3-2024	52
24.	China reports 'hard-won' economic results for 2023, as two sessions to focus on continued recovery By Wang Cong, Li Xuanmin and Ma Jingjing	Global Times, China	1-3-2024	53
25.	China's economic activity rebounds in 2023: IMF - Xinhua	People's Daily, China	3-3-2024	54

**THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 1-3-2024**  
**India's Q3 GDP bucks all estimates at**  
**8.4% growth**  
**Roshan Kishore**

The Indian economy continued to outperform, with GDP growth in the quarter ending December coming in at 8.4%, beating analyst estimates by around 180 basis points or 1.8 percentage points, and the government now expects the economy to grow by 7.6% in 2023-24, up from the 7.3% projected in January. The numbers, which will force economists and analysts to question whether they seriously underestimated the momentum in India's economy, were released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) on Thursday, although a closer reading does point to some concerns over the tepid growth in consumption spending, one of the pillars of GDP.

GDP growth in the quarter ending December 2023 is 8.4%, almost two percentage points more than the 6.6% number predicted by a Bloomberg poll of economists. And GDP growth in the quarters ending June and September 2023 now stands at 8.2% and 8.1% respectively, instead of the 7.8% and 7.6% when the September quarter numbers were released on November 30, 2023. In terms of a sectoral growth performance, manufacturing and construction are among the best performers with annual growth rate of 8.5% and 10.7% respectively.

"The actual performance of the economy has continued to defy expectations and do better than what many had projected, underscoring the fact that a structural transformation of the economy is indeed underway, both in terms of physical infrastructure and digital infrastructure as well as inclusion agenda boosting the purchasing power of Indian households," chief economic adviser V Anantha Nageswaran said, citing estimates of various agencies, such as ADB (6.7% for FY24), IMF (6.7%) and Fitch (6.9%). "So that is the case for many agencies to re-appraise their estimate of potential GDP growth in India to closer to 7% if not above. And let's also remember that the central bank, Reserve Bank of India, is projecting 7% GDP growth for FY25 as well," he added.

The latest GDP numbers only strengthen India's relative advantage vis-à-vis other major economies in the world in terms of growth.

"Robust 8.4% GDP growth in Q3 2023-24 shows the strength of Indian economy and its potential. Our efforts will continue to bring fast economic growth which shall help 140 crore (1.4 billion) Indians lead a better life and create a Viksit Bharat!" PM Narendra Modi said in a post on X.

In retrospect, the numbers also buttress the views of Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) member Prof Jayanth R Varma, who argued in the February MPC meeting against the growth-pessimism of the majority of the MPC. "Perhaps, the majority of the MPC worry

that the output gap has already closed, and that the projected growth rate of 7% for 2024-25 exceeds the growth potential of the Indian economy. I do not think that such growth pessimism is warranted... If the potential growth rate of the economy is close to 8%, then the economy is not at risk of overheating in 2024-25", the MPC minutes released on February 22 quoted Varma as saying in the meeting held between February 6 to 8.

"Today's print suggests growth is moving faster than expected by RBI, which means the central bank will see little urgency to cut rates while the MPC awaits for comfort on headline inflation. In our view, four members of the MPC remain hawkish as per the February meeting and solid growth will buy them more time to wait and watch data on inflation, especially on food," Rahul Bajoria, MD & Head of EM Asia (ex-China) Economics, Barclays, said in a note. "We expect the steady domestic growth momentum to continue, supported by continued increases in government capex, much anticipated rising private investment and monetary easing," he added.

These favourable observations notwithstanding, a slightly detailed look at latest and revised GDP numbers released on Thursday raises some interesting questions. Along with quarterly GDP numbers and Second Advance Estimates of GDP for 2023-24, NSO has also replaced First Revised Estimates of 2021-22 GDP with Second Revised Estimates and the Provisional Estimates of 2022-23 GDP with First Revised Estimates in its latest release on GDP numbers. As a result of these revisions, GDP growth in 2022-23 now stands at 7% instead of 7.2% according to the GDP data released in January 2024. Clearly, these revisions have played a role in the tweak in the headline GDP growth number and its components for 2023-24.

Given the fact that GDP numbers for 2021-22 and 2022-23 have also changed between the First Advance Estimates and Second Advance Estimates for 2023-24 GDP, a better question to ask is how has the Indian economy grown between 2021-22 and 2023-24 in the January and February sets of numbers released this year. GDP growth over this two-year period has remained unchanged at 15.1% in both sets of numbers. However, a look at some key disaggregates offers some interesting insights. Growth in Gross Value Added (GVA) between 2021-22 and 2023-24 between the January 2024 and February 2024 numbers has come down from 14.4% to 14.1%. The reason why GDP growth has remained unchanged is an increase in growth of the Net Taxes head – GDP is the sum of GVA and Net Taxes – from 23.8% to 27.7% in the January and February numbers. This could be a result of higher growth in taxes or lower spending on subsidies. Two-year growth in Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE) and Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF) also shows a fall in the January and February numbers. PFCE growth fell from

12.3% to 10% in the January and February data while GFCF growth fell from 22.9% to 17.5% in the January and February data. Government Final Consumption Expenditure (GFCE) growth, on the other hand, shows a sharp increase in growth between 2021-22 and 2023-24 from 4.2% to 12.3% in the January and February numbers.

Comparison of sector-wise aggregates of GVA shows similar results. All major subsectors except Financial, Real Estate & Professional Services and Public Administration, Defence & Other Services show a fall in two-year growth between 2021-22 and 2023-24 in the Second Advance Estimates released on Thursday compared to what was shown in the First Advance Estimates released in January. The biggest downward revision in proportional terms during this two year period is for manufacturing, which has seen its two-year growth being revised from 8% in the January data to 6.1% in the February data. In fact, manufacturing has seen its 1.3% annual growth in 2022-23 in the First Advance Estimates being changed to a 2.2% contraction after the revised 2021-22 and 2022-23 GDP numbers released along with the Second Advance Estimates for 2023-24.

The macroeconomic essence of these two-year GDP/GVA growth comparisons shows that both private consumption (PFCE) and capital formation (GFCF) have grown at a slower pace over the two-year period than what was believed earlier and the economy has thrived on spending and taxes from white-collar private employees (they dominate the financial services sector) and government employees.

In fact, annual growth in PFCE in 2023-24, as per the Second Advance Estimates, is expected to be just 3% compared to 4.4% in the First Advance Estimates released in January. If the pandemic-induced contraction in 2020-21 is excluded, PFCE growth in 2023-24 is the lowest since the 2.87% annual growth in PFCE growth in 2002-03. India experienced one of its worst ever droughts in 2002. That PFCE growth should come close to what was seen a severe drought year in a normal year when anecdotal accounts suggest a sharp consumption boom among the rich, suggests a problem as far as demand in the rest of the economy is concerned.

#### **THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 7-3-2024**

### **India to grow at 6.8 pc in FY'25, to become upper middle-income country by 2031: Crisil Ratings**

*Says the next seven fiscals (2025-2031) will see Indian economy crossing USD 5 trillion-mark and inching closer to USD 7 trillion*

**PTI**

**New Delhi,** Crisil Ratings on Wednesday projected India's GDP growth at 6.8 per cent in the next fiscal and

said the country will become an upper middle-income nation by 2031 with the economy doubling to USD 7 trillion.

In its India Outlook report, Crisil said the Indian economy will take support from domestic structural reforms and cyclical levers and can retain—perhaps even improve—its growth prospects to become the third largest economy by 2031.

“After a better-than-expected 7.6 per cent this fiscal, India's real GDP growth will likely moderate to 6.8 per cent in fiscal 2025,” said the Crisil India Outlook report.

It said that the next seven fiscals (2025-2031) will see the Indian economy crossing the USD 5 trillion-mark and inching closer to USD 7 trillion.

“A projected average expansion of 6.7 per cent in this period will make India the third-largest economy in the world and lift per capita income to the upper-middle income category by 2031,” Crisil said.

India, with a GDP size of USD 3.6 trillion, is currently the fifth largest economy in the world, after the US, China, Japan and Germany.

Crisil expects the economy to expand to USD USD 6.7 trillion by fiscal 2031.

Fiscal 2031 will mark the year when India enters the club of upper middle-income countries with per-capita income rising to USD 4,500, Crisil said.

As per World Bank definition, lower-middle income countries are those with per-capita income of USD 1,000-4,000, and upper-middle income countries are those with per capita income between USD 4,000-12,000.

Crisil Managing Director and CEO Amish Mehta said, “By fiscal 2031, India will be the No. 3 economy and an upper-middle income country, which will be a big positive for domestic consumption.” India's manufacturing sector is at a sweet spot due to high capacity utilisation across key sectors, opportunities from global supply-chain diversification, thrust on infrastructure investment, the green-transition imperative and strong balance sheets of lenders.

“Continuous reforms, enhanced global competitiveness and moving up the value chain will boost the share of manufacturing in India's GDP beyond the projected 20 per cent in fiscal 2031,” Mehta said.

Crisil report said near- and medium-term challenges to growth outlook would come from geopolitics, slowing potential growth from an uneven global recovery, climate change and technological disruptions.

The report said the near term will be characterised by fiscal consolidation, with the gradually receding role of government capex and expectations of the baton being taken up by the the private sector.

Emerging sectors, which are growing faster than others, are electronics, EV, and energy transition-intensive and they account for 16 per cent of the incremental capex in fiscals 2023 and 2024.

Through fiscal 2031, both cylinders of the economy—manufacturing and services—will fire, yielding a sturdier growth path.

Crisil Chief Economist Dharmakirti Joshi said there is ample opportunity for both manufacturing and services to cater to domestic and global demand.

“We project manufacturing and services to grow 9.1 per cent and 6.9 per cent, respectively, between fiscals 2025 and 2031. Despite some growth catch-up by manufacturing, services will remain the dominant driver of India’s growth,” Joshi said.

#### **THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 1-3-2024**

### **Express View on India’s GDP:**

#### **Reading the spike**

The Indian economy will grow at 7.6 per cent in the ongoing financial year (2023-24) as per the National Statistical Office’s second advance estimates of national income. GDP growth for the year has now been pegged to be higher than the NSO’s first estimate of 7.3 per cent. However, both estimates have pegged gross value added (GVA) to grow at 6.9 per cent this year.

This could imply that the difference between the two estimates may, in part, lie in net taxes on products. This gap reflects in the third quarter data as well — while GVA growth has been estimated at 6.5 per cent, GDP growth has been pegged at 8.4 per cent.

According to analysts, the gap stems from a surge in net taxes on products. This may not be sustainable. There have also been substantial revisions in the previous data. Accounting for them, value added in the economy has declined from 8.2 per cent in the first quarter to 6.5 per cent in the third quarter. The sector wise data reveals the subdued performance of the agricultural sector. It has been estimated to grow at a mere 0.7 per cent in 2023-24, down from 4.7 per cent in 2022-23. Value added by the sector, in fact, fell by 0.8 per cent in the third quarter of this year. On the other hand, the industrial sector (mining, manufacturing, electricity, gas and water supply, and construction) has picked up pace, growing at 9 per cent this year. The healthy performance of the sector is on the back of a pick-up in manufacturing and a sustained performance in construction.

The manufacturing sector, which had contracted by 2.2 per cent last year, is now expected to grow at 8.5 per cent this year. This also reflects in the data from the index of industrial production. Alongside, the

construction sector is pegged to grow at 10.7 per cent this year, up from 9.4 per cent last year. The services sector, though, has seen a mild deceleration when compared to last year. Segments — trade, hotels, transport and communication, financial, real estate and professional services, and public administration — have grown at a slower pace this year. Despite the economy growing at a healthy pace, consumption continues to disappoint. Private spending grew by just 3.5 per cent in the third quarter, and is expected to grow at 3 per cent for the full year. This touches off questions. Investment activity, though, continues to remain heartening, growing at 10.2 per cent for the full year. But implicit in the NSO’s latest estimates is that the economy is likely to grow at 5.9 per cent in the fourth quarter.

#### **THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 11-3-2024**

### **India-Bhutan Buddhist fest ends near Tawang**

#### **Tribune News Service**

**New Delhi,** A four-day Buddhist festival ‘Gorsam Kora’ with Indian and Bhutanese people participating ended today at Zemithang valley located west of Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh.

This annual festival was held at Gorsam Chorten, the sanctuary where the 14th Dalai Lama found refuge upon his escape from Tibet in March 1959.

Incidentally today is the 65th anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule. This date commemorates the beginning of a conflict that eventually led to the exile of the Dalai Lama.

During the 1962 India-China war, clashes had first broken out on the Zemithang area.

The ‘Gorsam Chorten’ is an icon for Himalayan Buddhism which is older than the Tawang monastery located at Tawang town about 92 km to the East. A 93-ft tall stupa, built during 13th century, stands there along the Nyanmjang Chu river.

It is modelled after Boudhinath stupa of Nepal and also has a spiritual companion, the Chorten Kora in Trashiyangtse of Bhutan across the ridge to the West, built in 1740.

Thousands of devotees, including large number of Bhutanese nationals, visit during Gorsam Kora festival to observe the occasion during the last day of the first month of the lunar calendar.

The event was organised by the local community of Zemithang in collaboration with civil authorities and active support by local Indian Army units.

**THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 2-3-2024**

**Is India overestimating food inflation?**

**Zia Haq**

India may be misreading retail inflation data after the most recent Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) 2022–23, released on February 23, 2024, revealed that the percentage of expenditure on food and cereal consumption of an average family has declined sharply.

Spending on discretionary items such as durable goods like televisions and refrigerators has risen dramatically over the past decade or so, the consumption data showed. At the same time, Indians are spending less on food, particularly cereals like rice and wheat.

The share of food in rural Indians' household budgets dipped below the 50% mark for the first time in 2022–23 since 1950-51, when the data began to be collected, the results of the long-awaited HCES 2022–23 revealed.

People are spending less on cereals and pulses, but more on beverages, refreshments and processed food items. In the non-food category, consumers are spending more on transport, services and durable white goods.

These findings are in line with what is known as Engel's law in economics. As people move up the income ladder, their spending on food, as a proportion of their overall monthly spending, decreases.

The HCES 2022–23 shows that average rural consumer spending rose to an estimated 3,773 a month per person for the 12 months through July 2023 from 1,430 in the previous survey in 2011–12. Urban spending rose to 6,459 from 2,630.

The new survey will now have to form the basis of a review of India's Consumer Price Inflation Index, or CPI, which measures retail inflation. One key reason for this is that food accounts for roughly half of the CPI.

“The latest consumer expenditure survey gives insight into spending patterns of Indian households and is key to gauging demand in the economy. The data will also be used by the government to readjust items considered for calculating retail inflation and gross domestic product data,” the survey report stated.

The latest survey shows that overall food consumption as a proportion in rural regions has decreased from nearly 60% in 1999-2000 and 53% in 2011-12 to 46% currently. The spending patterns in cities show a similar trend: food consumption fell to 39% from 43% in 2011-12.

“The CPI will need to be readjusted and recalibrated to represent current consumption patterns,” said BVR Subrahmanyam, CEO of the central government think tank, Niti Aayog. This means the share of food and cereals will go down in it.

To calculate retail inflation, economists assign weights to different commodities in the CPI basket to reflect spending patterns. More expenditure on food means more weight assigned to it. In the current CPI, therefore, the weightage given to food expenditure is outdated.

This means inflation in India has been overestimating food inflation, Subrahmanyam said. When the CPI is readjusted to reflect newer spending patterns, food will contribute less to CPI inflation.

To be sure, the Niti Aayog will conduct one more survey round to get a more accurate picture of consumption habits before heading to the drawing board to rebalance the CPI, said economist Pronab Sen, the head of a government committee on statistics.

The government will conduct another HCES between August 2023 and July 2024, which will then be used to make changes in the CPI index. The new CPI index will be closer to the spending patterns and consumption habits and price changes in the larger economy, he said.

**THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 4-3-2024**

**Consumption trends and monetary policy**

**Janak Raj**

*The falling share of food in households' spending will help, given food inflation also drives inflation expectations*

Consumption is the mainstay of India's aggregate demand, constituting around 60% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Therefore, it is important to understand consumption behaviour at a disaggregated level periodically to gauge any changing patterns. The Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) for 2022-23 was released recently — the last such exercise was conducted in 2011-12. HCES 2022-23 has undergone some changes as compared to the previous surveys. These, among others, include enlarged coverage of items, changes in the questionnaire, multiple visits as against the single visits in earlier surveys, and changes in the mode of data collection. Owing to these differences, the results of HCES 2022-23 are not strictly comparable with those of the previous surveys. But then, that is generally the case with any two surveys conducted after a long time gap. At times, however, a comparison with the previous data series becomes unavoidable — though we need to be careful while interpreting the results.

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exercise was conducted in 2011-12. HCES 2022-23 has undergone some changes as compared to the previous surveys. These, among others, include enlarged coverage of items, changes in the questionnaire, multiple visits as against the single visits in earlier surveys, and changes in the mode of data collection. Owing to these differences, the results of HCES 2022-23 are not strictly comparable with those of the previous surveys. But then, that is generally the case with any two surveys conducted after a long time gap. At times, however, a comparison with the previous data series becomes unavoidable — though we need to be careful while interpreting the results.

The survey data suggest some interesting trends. Average monthly per capita consumption expenditure (MPCE) was 3,773 in rural India and 6,459 in urban India in 2022-23 as against 1,431 in rural India and 2,629 in urban India in 2011-12. Since the last survey, rural consumption expenditure has grown at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9.2% and urban consumption expenditure at 8.5%. However, these rates were sharply lower than the 10.3% and 10.8% recorded for rural and urban India, respectively, between 1999-2000 and 2011-12.

At a broad category level, non-food expenditure has grown at a much higher rate (CAGR) than food expenditure, both in rural and urban India. Non-food expenditure in rural India grew at a CAGR of 10.5% as compared with food expenditure CAGR of 7.9%. Non-food expenditure in urban India also grew at a higher rate of 9.1% relative to 7.7% food expenditure. Significantly, both food and non-food expenditure in rural India grew at a higher rate vis-à-vis urban India, though the gap between the two in non-food expenditure was much larger relative to food expenditure.

Currently, the weight of food in the CPI consumption basket is 45.9%, based on 2011-12 data. However, there has been a decline in the share of food in average MPCE, both in rural and urban India—the decline in the share of food in average MPCE in rural India was much sharper (to 46.4% in 2022-23 from 59.4% in 1999-00) compared with urban India (to 39.2% in 2022-23 from 48.1% in 1999-2000). In fact, the decline in the share of food in average MPCE in the last 12 years (2009-10 and 2022-23) of almost 10 percentage points in rural India was twice the decline in urban India. Therefore, if the weights based on the latest round are applied, the weight of food items will decline accordingly. A decline in the relative significance of food expenditure relative to non-food over time is a natural outcome of economic progression and, hence, it is only to be expected.

Large disparities exist between consumption expenditure in rural India vis-à-vis urban India. The ratio of rural and urban consumption expenditure remained in a very narrow range, between 0.52 to 0.58, in the last 23 years. The ratio at 0.58 in 2022-23, though

marginally higher than that of 0.54 in the 68th round (2011-12), was not much different from the ratio of 0.56 in the 55th round (1999-2000). Thus, in the last 23 years, there has been no significant change in the overall rural-urban consumption pattern on a per capita basis, with rural India spending little more than half of what urban India spends on consumption.

Disparities in consumption expenditure exist not only between rural and urban India but also within rural and urban India. The ratio of average consumption spend of the top 5% of India's rural population and the bottom 5% was 7.6 as compared with 10.4 in urban India. Thus, the disparities in urban expenditure were larger than those in rural areas.

From the above analysis, the following four points emerge. First, overall consumption has slowed down between the last two rounds of surveys (2022-23 vis-à-vis 2011-12), compared with the consumption expenditure growth between 1999-00 and 2011-12. Second, the slowdown in consumption expenditure has been more pronounced in urban India than in rural India. Third, the overall rural-urban consumption expenditure pattern has remained broadly unchanged in the last 23 years, with rural consumption expenditure constituting a little more than half of urban consumption expenditure. Therefore, any slowdown in urban consumption would impact overall demand much more severely than a similar slowdown in rural demand. Fourth, the share of food expenditure has declined, while that of non-food has increased, and this trend has been more pronounced in rural India than in urban India.

Of the four trends outlined above, the last trend (the rise in the share of non-food vis-à-vis food) augurs well for monetary policy. Prices of food items are driven by supply-side factors and hence more volatile and are not amenable to monetary policy, which is essentially a tool to contain demand-side pressures. In the recent period and on several occasions in the past, food inflation has been the main factor behind the elevated headline inflation and inflation expectations. If high food inflation persists, there is always a risk of it spilling over to the generalised inflation through the wage-price spiral. Therefore, the lower weight of food in the CPI basket, as and when it is made effective, should provide the RBI greater manoeuvrability in the conduct of monetary policy. Since inflation expectations are also driven largely by food inflation, lower food inflation (due to the lower weight of food) should also have a salutary effect on inflation expectations and actual inflation.

*Janak Raj is Senior Fellow at Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP). The views expressed are personal*

**THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 3-3-2024****Extreme poverty nearly eliminated in India, says World Poverty Clock**

*Time has come for India to graduate to higher poverty line, says Brookings Institution*

**Aditi Tandon**

**New Delhi,** In a significant development on Saturday, the World Poverty Clock showed India's extreme poverty at less than 3 per cent in signs that the country has now eliminated acute levels of poverty.

The World Poverty Clock said less than 3 per cent of the Indian population is now living below the extreme poverty line of \$1.9 PPP (purchasing power parity) a day, which comes to around 3.4 crore people. In a parallel development, Brookings Institution, a leading US think tank producing research in economy, cited data to confirm elimination of extreme poverty in India and argued that India should now graduate to a higher poverty line. In a commentary published by the Brookings Institution, economists Surjit Bhalla and Karan Bhasin say, "Official data now confirms that India has eliminated extreme poverty, as commonly defined in international comparisons. This is an encouraging development with positive implications for global poverty headcount rates. This also means that time has come for India to graduate to a higher poverty line, much like other countries. The transition to a higher poverty line provides an opportunity to redefine existing social protection programme particularly with the objective of better identification of intended beneficiaries and providing greater support to the genuine poor."

The authors used the just released Indian official consumption expenditure data for 2022-23 providing the first official survey-based poverty estimates for the country in over 10 years.

The data shows real capita consumption growth of 2.9 per cent per annum since 2011-12 with rural growth at 3.1 per cent per annum significantly higher than the urban growth of 2.6 per cent. There has been a decline in both urban and rural inequality. "High growth and large decline in inequality have combined to eliminate poverty in India for the PPP\$ 1.9 poverty line. Here we use the PPP\$ 1.9 line (2011 prices) rather than the PPP\$ 2.15 line at 2017 prices because the former closely corresponds to the official India Tendulkar poverty line. The Headcount Poverty Ratio (HCR) for the 2011 PPP\$ 1.9 poverty line has declined from 12.2 per cent in 2011-12 to 2 per cent in 2022-23, equivalent to 0.93 percentage points per year. Rural poverty stood at 2.5 per cent while urban poverty was down to 1 per cent. For the PPP\$ 3.2 line, the HCR declined from 53.6 per cent to 20.8 per cent (almost 3 percentage points per year)," the authors say.

**THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 4-3-2024****Majority of Indians poor going by World Bank's global poverty line: Retired JNU professor**

*Arun Kumar's contention comes days after Niti Aayog chief executive officer B.V.R. Subrahmanyam claimed on February 25 that the proportion of the poor in India had dropped to below five per cent of the population*

**Basant Kumar Mohanty,** New Delhi

The majority of Indians are poor going by the World Bank's criterion for determining global poverty, a retired JNU economics professor has asserted.

Arun Kumar's contention comes days after Niti Aayog chief executive officer B.V.R. Subrahmanyam claimed on February 25 that the proportion of the poor in India had dropped to below five per cent of the population.

Subrahmanyam did not explain how he had arrived at the figure. It's possible he had applied — after adjusting for inflation — the poverty line recommended by the Suresh Tendulkar committee in 2005 on the recently released findings of the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) 2022-23, done by the National

Sample Survey Office.

Several experts have over the past week underlined that the latest HCES used a methodology different from those of past HCES, and the Tendulkar formula was therefore inapplicable to it.

Kumar added to this a different criticism, emphasising that the poverty line was not an absolute cut-off but changed across places and time. Therefore, the Tendulkar poverty line was not appropriate for 2022-23.

"The poverty line needs to be redefined from time to time. Certain goods and services like mobile phones may now be a necessity for even a poor person, such as a rickshaw-puller or plumber. But they were not considered so necessary two decades ago," he said.

"Any poverty line ought to be based on the 'social minimum necessary consumption', which would today include a balanced diet, quality education for children, access to quality healthcare, adequate housing, proper clothing, clean drinking water and uninterrupted electricity. Those deprived of these facilities can be called poor."

Kumar said that according to the World Bank's global poverty line, anyone spending below \$2.15 a day is poor. For a family of five, this comes to \$322 or Rs 26,677 a month. However, the real value of \$322 in terms of purchasing power parity comes to around Rs 10,000, he said.

In 2023, official reports said 94 per cent of the 8.4 crore unorganised-sector workers registered with the Union

labour ministry's E-Shram portal had declared they earned less than Rs 10,000 a month, Kumar said.

"I would consider 90 per cent of the 30 crore workers registered now to be earning less than Rs 10,000 a month," he added.

Assuming that most of these workers supported a family of five, Kumar said, the majority of Indians "may be considered poor, if not extremely poor, going by the World Bank's global poverty line".

He clarified that the World Bank's poverty line was not India-specific and that his calculations were merely "indicative". However, since the government has not come up with a fresh poverty line and the Tendulkar recommendations are dated, the only appropriate poverty line available is the World Bank's, Kumar added.

The erstwhile Planning Commission periodically set up expert committees to suggest an updated poverty line, which was applied to data obtained through the HCES. The Niti Aayog no longer sets up these committees.

#### **THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 4-3-2024**

### **There are no poor in India**

**P Chidambaram**

Don't be surprised if you wake up one morning and read the screaming headline in the newspapers "No more poor: India abolishes poverty". That is what the NITI Aayog wants you to believe. A venerable institution like the Planning Commission has been reduced to an ingratiating spokesperson of the government. First, it announced that its estimate of the proportion of people who are multi-dimensionally poor was 11.28 per cent. Now, its CEO has announced his discovery that the poor in India are no more than 5 per cent of the population.

The CEO made this astonishing claim based on the results of the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) published by the National Sample Survey Office. The HCES did throw up some pleasant surprises but it certainly did not lead to the conclusion that the proportion of the poor in India amounted to no more than 5 per cent.

#### **Reading Data**

HCES was conducted between August 2022 and July 2023. It collected information from 8,723 villages and 6,115 urban blocks covering 2,61,745 households (60 per cent in rural areas and 40 per cent in urban areas). We shall assume that the sample was sufficiently representative and the methodology was statistically sound. The aim was to calculate the Monthly Per Capita Expenditure (MPCE) in current/nominal prices. On average, a person's monthly expenditure was:

Median expenditure means that the per capita expenditure of 50 per cent of the total population was no

more than Rs 3,094 (rural) and Rs 4,963 (urban). Take the bottom 50 per cent. Go down fractile by fractile. Statement 4 of the Report gives the numbers:

Let's stop at the bottom 20 per cent. Does the NITI Aayog seriously argue that any person whose monthly spend (on food and non-food) is about Rs 2,112 or Rs 70 a day in rural areas is not poor? Or any person whose monthly spend is Rs 3,157 or Rs 100 a day in urban areas is not poor? I suggest that the government give the NITI Aayog officials Rs 2,100 each and ask him/her to go and live in a rural area for a month and report on how 'rich' his/her life was.

#### **Observed Realities**

HCES revealed that the share of food in consumption had reduced to 46 per cent in rural areas and 39 per cent in urban areas. That is probably true because of rising income/expenditure and the value of food consumption remaining the same or rising at a slower rate. Other data confirmed long-observed realities. Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes are the poorest social groups. They are below the average. OBC are near the average. It is the 'others' who are above the average.

State-wise data also confirm the observed realities. The poorest citizens are those who live in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Meghalaya — their MPCE is below the all-India average MPCE for rural areas. There is only a little difference in the names of states if we consider the all-India average MPCE for urban areas. These states were ruled for long years by the BJP and other non-Congress parties. Surprisingly, demolishing the hype, Gujarat, ruled by the BJP since 1995, hugs the all-India average MPCE in rural areas (Rs 3,798 vs Rs 3,773) as well as in urban areas (Rs 6,621 vs Rs 6,459).

#### **Blind to the Poor**

What riles me is the claim that the poor in India are no more than 5 per cent of the population. The implication is that the poor are a vanishing tribe and let's turn our attention and resources to the middle class and the rich. If the claim is true —

Why does the government distribute 5 kg of free grain per person per month to 80 crore people? After all, cereal and substitutes account for only 4.91 per cent (rural) and 3.64 per cent (urban) of the total MPCE.

If the poor are no more than 5 per cent, why did the National Family Health Survey-5 record the following alarming facts:

Children age 6-59 months	Percent
who are anaemic	67.1
All women age 15-49 years	
who are anaemic	57.0
Children under 5 years	
who are stunted	35.5

Children under 5 years

who are wasted 19.5

Has the NITI Aayog closed its eyes to the children who beg on the streets of Delhi? Does it not know that there are hundreds of thousands of people who are homeless and sleep on pavements or under bridges?

Why are there 15.4 crore active registered workers under MGNREGS? Why do Ujjwala beneficiaries, on average, buy only 3.7 cylinders in a year?

If the NITI Aayog wants to serve the rich, let it do so, but let it not mock the poor. The government may not succeed in eliminating poverty, but it is trying hard to banish the poor from its sight.

### **THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 1-3-2024**

#### **Trade with India in Rupee faces setback**

The recent disclosure of the Bangladesh-India trade exchanges, conducted predominantly in Indian Rupees (INR), has sparked discussions on the efficacy of this initiative. However, the unveiled statistics of a mere \$0.52 million in transactions over six months signify a sluggish start, dampening initial hopes for a robust trade relationship between the two neighbouring nations.

The trade dynamics appear skewed, with import transactions dominating the landscape, amounting to INR 27.1 million or \$0.31 million, while export Letter of Credit (LC) transactions lag behind the INR at 17.1 million or \$0.194 million. This grim scenario paints a picture of a significant trade deficit, raising concerns about the sustainability of the current bilateral trade trajectory.

Delving deeper into the intricacies of the trade mechanism, it becomes evident that only a handful of banks, notably Eastern Bank Limited (EBL), State Bank of India (SBI), and Standard Chartered Bank (SCB), have actively engaged in INR trade transactions. The limited participation is mirrored in the total value of opened LCs, signalling a hesitancy among financial institutions to fully embrace this new avenue of trade. Despite optimistic projections from industry leaders like Amit Kumar, the Country Head of SBI Bangladesh, challenges persist in realizing the full potential of INR-based trade. A major stumbling block identified is the entrenched preference of exporters to conduct transactions in USD, thereby impeding the growth of BDT-INR trade. This reluctance underscores the need for concerted efforts to incentivize and educate stakeholders about the advantages of INR-based transactions.

The establishment of nostro accounts by key players like Sonali Bank Ltd, EBL, SBI, and ICICI Bank signifies a step in the right direction. However, broader adoption among banks remains elusive, posing a

formidable obstacle to the seamless execution of INR trade. Nostro accounts, facilitating foreign currency transactions between banks of different countries, hold the key to unlocking the full potential of BDT-INR trade.

Looking ahead, the upward trajectory of BDT-INR trade hinges on overcoming operational hurdles and garnering broader industry support. Mezbaul Haque, spokesperson for Bangladesh Bank, expressed optimism about the growing interest among banks to participate in INR trade, signaling potential for expansion in the future.

However, concerted efforts from all stakeholders, including governments, financial institutions, and businesses, are imperative to navigate the complexities and unleash the true potential of the Bangladesh-India trade exchanges.

Lastly, while the initial figures may paint a subdued picture, the prospects for BDT-INR trade remain promising. With strategic interventions and collaborative efforts, the two nations can harness the untapped potential of this initiative, fostering mutually beneficial trade relations and driving economic growth across the borders.

### **THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 13-3-2024**

#### **Bangladesh, Japan begin talks on trade deal**

##### **STAR BUSINESS REPORT**

The government yesterday initiated talks to sign the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with Japan in order to retain the duty benefit after Bangladesh's scheduled graduation to a developing nation in 2026.

State Minister for Commerce Ahsanul Islam Titu formally announced the beginning of the negotiation at a press conference at his ministry office in Dhaka.

"Bangladesh will face more than 18 percent duty on the export of goods after 2026 if the EPA is not inked," said Senior Commerce Secretary Tapan Kanti Ghosh.

If deals are not struck with trading partners before 2026, Bangladesh, as a graduating nation from least-developed country (LDC) status, will have to seek the continuation of the duty-free market access until 2029 bilaterally to the member countries of the World Trade Organisation.

The 13th ministerial conference of the WTO in Abu Dhabi last month agreed to provide the duty benefit to the graduating LDCs for additional three years after graduation.

As such, Bangladesh will have to pen bilateral trade deals in order to retain duty facilities in the post-LDC era.

Thus, Bangladesh is negotiating with major trading partners to sign preferential deals like the EPA, the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, the Preferential Trade Agreement, and the Free Trade Agreement.

Japan is the only country in Asia where Bangladesh's exports crossed the \$1-billion mark nearly one decade ago as shipments to the economy started rising on the back of the duty benefit extended to the LDCs.

The export of merchandise, especially garment items, to Japan was \$1.90 billion in the “So,

year of 2022-23 and the import stood at \$2.02 billion, according to data from the commerce ministry.

The figures indicate that Japan is a growing export destination for Bangladesh and Japanese investors are also eager to invest here as they see the country as a potential business destination thanks to its expanding consumer class.

A recent survey of the Japan External Trade Organisation (Jetro) showed that about 85 percent of the local and Japanese companies with operations in both countries want their governments to sign an FTA.

“So, both countries have agreed to sign the EPA,” Ghosh said.

The pact will go beyond tariffs and will include 17 more sectors such as investment, trade in goods, trade remedies, rules of origin, customs procedures and trade facilitation, sanitary and phytosanitary, labour, business environment, transparency, intellectual property, and e-commerce.

Before the formal launch of the negotiation, three rounds of meetings by the joint study group were held last year in order to pave the way for a formal launch, the senior secretary said.

Both sides have the target to conclude the negotiation by December 2025 so that the duty benefits can be ensured long before their expiry in November 2026.

Speaking at the briefing, Ahsanul Islam Titu said Japan is a strategic partner for Bangladesh and projects like the Matarbari deep seaport and the metro rail in Dhaka are being implemented with assistance from Tokyo.

IWAMA Kiminori, ambassador of Japan to Bangladesh, said it is not possible to say how much both countries will benefit if the EPA is signed.

“However, it will be a win-win deal for both countries.”

“The EPA is not all about tariffs. Rather, it includes many factors like trade facilitation, non-tariff barriers, removal of customs barriers and the whole economy of both countries.”

## **THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 13-3-2024**

### **BD agrees to buy hydro-power from Nepal at 6.5 cents per unit**

**Shahnaj Begum**

Bangladesh has agreed to buy hydro-power from Nepal at a rate of 6.5 cents for per unit; however, Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) would not bear the cost of transmission and trade margin (service charge) for the supply of power to Bangladesh.

Following several tariff negotiation meetings, both sides fixed the tariff, however, the issue would be sent before the cabinet committee on government purchase for final approval, Power Division sources said. Bangladesh wants to purchase electricity from Nepal at five cents per unit, while Nepal wants 7 cents per unit, which is delaying a power deal between the two countries, an official from the power Division has said.

“We have reached a final decision,” Mohammad Hossain, director general of Power Cell told the Daily Observer on Tuesday. A team led by NEA executive director Kul Man Ghising visited Bangladesh very recently and fixed the rate last week, the official said.

Upon tariff agreement, Nepal, Bangladesh and India anticipate signing a tripartite deal, marking Nepals maiden power export to Bangladesh.

According to the agreement, Bangladesh anticipates receiving a total of 40 MW of electricity from Nepal, comprising 24 MW from the Trishuli project and 16 MW from another power plant. The electricity will be transmitted to the national grid at Bheramara, Bangladesh, via the Baharampur transmission line in India.

Earlier, a joint statement issued on February 22 said both parties intend to expedite a power sale agreement to facilitate Nepals electricity export during the forthcoming rainy season but now there is no room to get the electricity before October, official said.

NEA proposes Bangladesh to export 40MW of power from June 15 to November 15, 2024 with the agreement slated for five-year duration. The transmission will occur via the Nepal-India Dhalkebar-Muzaffarpur Cross Border Transmission Line and the India-Bangladesh Baharampur-Bheramara Cross Border Transmission Line.

However, India has already agreed in principle to facilitate the export of 40MW power from Nepal to Bangladesh.

To manage the electricity demand-supply gap in future, Bangladesh plans to import 9,000 MW of electricity from neighbouring countries, seeking external sources to diversify its electricity supply and boost the proportion of renewable energy in its energy portfolio. The country is interested in purchasing 500 MW of

electricity from Nepal, with an initial contract for 40 MW.

"The government did not share the documents before signing any deal with any party. With the help of its officials (those are not expert in this regard), the government finalised all deals very poorly. What we see is when it comes to public domain. By that time we have nothing to do," Professor Dr Ijaz Hossain said.

In the proposal, Nepal has also offered concession in the bill, provided the Bangladeshi entity pays early.

"Bangladesh is expected to pay the bill within 45 days of its issuance," said Thike. "If the bill is paid within seven days of its issuance, the buyer will get a certain waiver in tariff."

He, however, said that Nepal has also proposed charging a higher tariff if the payment is delayed. "We have proposed a rebate and penalty clause depending on how early the bill is paid," official said.

Nepal exported power to India. Both Nepal and India have agreed, in principle, to involve Bangladesh as a partner for energy cooperation when they issued the Joint Vision Statement on Power Sector Cooperation in April 2022.

Nepal and Bangladesh in May, 2023 agreed to sign a tripartite agreement between the NEA, the Bangladesh Power Development Board and the NVVN at the meeting of the energy secretary-level Joint Steering Committee.

Earlier, Bangladesh had sent a draft request for proposal (RfP) in response to which Nepal proposed the tariff.

Besides tariff, Nepal has also included details on how Nepal would deliver power to Bangladesh.

According to official sources, after a long discussion at political and bureaucratic levels among the countries, India finally agreed to allow Bangladesh to initially import 40MW of electricity from Nepal through the Indian transmission infrastructure.

### **DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 12-3-2024**

#### **“Economic recovery to continue in 2024”**

Sri Lanka’s economy showed a strong recovery in 2023 following the IMF deal opined Standard Chartered Bank’s Global Research team that conducted its 2024 H1 Global Research Briefing (GRB) in Colombo recently.

The event themed ‘A soft landing, with risks’ was attended by corporate, commercial and institutional banking clients of the Bank and provided a valuable platform for participants to gain insights on the global and Sri Lankan economic outlooks for the first half of 2024.

The Global Research team said that this economic recovery is expected to continue in 2024, with a focus on commercial debt restructuring. “However, the potential election risk could create challenges for Sri Lanka in the year ahead.”

Presenting the global economic outlook, the Standard Chartered research team noted that in 2024, global growth is expected to face persistent challenges from elevated rates, sub-par global trade volumes, and geopolitical tensions. The year is anticipated to be defined by a shift from monetary tightening to a more neutral monetary stance for global central banks. As divergence under the surface continues and the USD and US rates stabilise, emerging markets may experience pockets of improved performance.

However, the new challenge for economies and markets in the year ahead may be election risk. CEO of Standard Chartered Sri Lanka Bingumal Thewarathanthri, said, “Standard Chartered is firmly committed to supporting Sri Lanka amidst economic headwinds. We are fully dedicated to assisting the government’s endeavours, and we believe that debt restructuring, and collaborative efforts will achieve positive outcomes for the country.”

“Despite the current uncertainties, we are optimistic for a brighter economic future and remain hopeful of achieving sustainable growth and prosperity.”

Central Bank Governor Dr. Nandalal Weerasinghe, commented on the country’s overall growth and the future inflation trends. Dr. Weerasinghe also elaborated on the importance of fiscal and other policy reforms, and strategies to mitigate future domestic and external risks by building on the country’s reserves. He also spoke of how Sri Lanka is expected to have a turnaround with a positive growth momentum in 2024 and how the Central Bank is hoping to maintain the inflation at 5% in the medium to long-term basis to aid growth.

### **DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 6-3-2024**

#### **SL economic indicators show steady recovery in February – FCR**

Sri Lanka’s Economic Indicators show steady recovery for February 2024 said First Capital Research (FCR).

Gross official Reserves strengthened further during the month of January-24 to USD 4.5 billion. Inflows from multilaterals totaling to +USD 700 million during December-23 together with the FX purchases carried out by the CBSL positively contributed towards the growth in reserves during the period.

“Going forward, we expect Sri Lanka to reach gross official reserves of USD 5 billion in 2024E and USD 6.0 billion in 2025E backed by the positive current

account balance and inflows from multilateral agencies.”

Private sector credit continued to improve during the concerned period, recording a +1.3% MoM growth to LKR 7.4 billion in December 2023. Upon completion of DDO, Sri Lanka successfully completed negotiations with the bilateral creditors including EXIM bank of China and Official Creditor Committee (OCC) which was co-chaired by India, Japan and France (as chair of the Paris Club), paving the way to receive the 2nd tranche of the IMF extended fund facility of USD 337.0 million. According to official sources, Sri Lanka is expected to sign a MoU with Paris Club within weeks.

Presently, the Government of Sri Lanka is conducting discussions with the private creditors (ISB bond holders and China Development Bank) to restructure USD 16.5 billion of debt and aims to complete negotiations within 6-months. CCPI inflation decreased to 5.9% in February-24 from 6.4% in January-24, caused by a decrease in non-food inflation, whilst food inflation was marginally up.

“However, our CCPI expectations for 2024 year end is anticipated to remain in the single digit territory and the expected band with no significant threat perceptible on price levels in the period ahead.”

The Business Cycle Indicators (BCI) spiked by 27 points on December-23 and closed at 85. The main cause for the improvement in confidence is securing the IMF 2nd tranche while gaining ground on EDR efforts.

### **DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 14-3-2024**

#### **Sri Lanka signs two agri sector agreements with Bangladesh**

Lankan Envoy meets Agriculture Minister Dr. Shahid:

Sri Lanka and Bangladesh should actively collaborate to further develop and enhance the strong bilateral cooperation in the agriculture sector by taking the initiative to engage in a two-way partnership for the benefit of both countries, said Sri Lanka’s High Commissioner Dharmapala Weerakkody during a courtesy call on the newly appointed Bangladeshi Agriculture Minister Dr. Abdus Shahid at his Ministry in Dhaka on Sunday (10).

During the meeting, the HC conveyed appreciation to Minister Shahid and the delegation of Bangladesh, for their recent visit to Sri Lanka to attend the 37th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific (APRC) which was held in Colombo in February this year and for his valuable contribution in the field of agriculture.

Identifying the importance of proactively developing the agriculture sector as a key component of sustainable development the Sri Lankan HC engaged in a

productive discussion to take forward the existing collaboration in the agriculture field. He emphasised the need to implement the two bilateral agreements on agriculture that have been entered into between the two countries.

The High Commissioner and the Minister also discussed the importance of accelerating the progress of research and training in the field of agriculture through the exchange of visiting scientists and other professionals and the free interchange of scientific information and joint partnership of seminars, workshops and other technology transfer projects. Both sides agreed on the importance of actively engaging in further collaboration and sharing of best practices, considering the longstanding partnership of the two countries.

### **DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 1-3-2024**

#### **Infrastructure development of Port City Colombo: China Harbour Corp. to reinvest USD 300 Mn**

Chairman China Communications Construction Company Ltd. (CCCC) Wang Tongzhou said that they will re-invest USD 300 million for the phase 2 infrastructure development of the Port City Colombo.

He made this pledge to President Ranil Wickramasinghe when the visiting CCCC delegation met with the President on Tuesday. Tongzhou said that by June this year the company plans to invest a total investment of approximately USD 300 million. The Chairman CCCC informed the President that CCCC will put in more resources to accelerate construction and development and enhance the global marketing and promotion efforts.

The Chairman also requested the President to provide CCCC with more opportunities in Sri Lanka’s transportation, urban development, energy, and water facilities. CCCC, through CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd has already invested USD 1.4 Billion, on Port City Colombo. Construction of the Port City Colombo project was launched 17 September 17, 2014.

Chief-of Staff to the President Sagala Ratnayaka, Chairman BOI and Port City Economic Commission, Dinesh Weerakkody, Secretary Investment and MD Port City Colombo Xiong Hongfeng participated in the meeting. The Fortune Global 500 ranks CCCC at 60th position with \$130.664 billion in revenue.

Meanwhile, State Minister for Investment Promotion, Dilum Amunugama said that the Chinese company is planning to build two towers at the Port City Colombo. “This will be used for the International Financial Center and also for both residential living (apartments) office and hotel spaces.” A five star hotel and redevelopment of the Marina Project too would be included under this

investment. This would be the first major hi rise construction to take place in the Colombo Port city. In addition 100 hectares of land would be developed and these also include streets capes and recreational parks. In May 2021, Parliament of Sri Lanka approved the Port City Commission Bill to establish the Colombo Port City Special Economic Zone and Economic Commission. Under this law, companies can be exempt from all taxes, personal, corporate, excise, import, and every other tax for 40 years. (SS)

### **SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 3-3-2024**

#### **Talks to resolve India-Sri Lanka fisheries issue**

**By Dinuli Francisco**

Sri Lanka and India have initiated talks to find a permanent solution to the longstanding issue of Indian fishermen, encroaching into Sri Lankan waters.

This follows a high-level meeting between the Chief of Staff of the President, Sagala Ratnayaka and Indian High Commissioner Santosh Jha last week.

The decision comes amid ongoing tensions, with Sri Lankan fishermen protesting against the activities of Indian vessels entering their territorial waters and employing unauthorised methods such as bottom trawling.

One hundred and seventy Indian fishermen have been detained by the Sri Lankan Navy due to these violations, with some already facing legal action in Sri Lankan courts. This has led to protests and hunger strikes in South India, further complicating the situation.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe has emphasised the urgency of finding a lasting solution to the issue, citing its recurrent nature despite previous temporary resolutions. Echoing this sentiment, the Indian Central Government has conveyed its willingness to engage in discussions for a remedy. Chief of Staff Ratnayaka, along with the Indian High Commissioner and their teams, have commenced talks to address the root cause of the dispute and fostering lasting peace between the two maritime neighbours.

### **THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 13-3-2024**

#### **Experts stress strong foreign policy tools to promote Nepal's trade**

*Nepal needs to advance foreign trade policy tools to leverage its trade as the country is set to graduate from a least developed country (LDC) in 2026, experts say.*

##### **Post Report**

Experts on Tuesday said Nepal needs a strong foreign trade policy tool to leverage its trade as the country is

set to graduate from a least developed country (LDC) in 2026.

Strong trade helps any country's economic prosperity. Thus, Nepal needs to advance foreign trade policy tools for its national interests, they argue.

Trade and foreign policy have been intertwined throughout history, with foreign policy often tailored to promote trade interests.

Speaking at a seminar entitled 'Contextualizing Nepal's Foreign Policy and Infrastructure Diplomacy in Changing Context,' organised by the Centre for Social Innovation and Foreign Policy, on Tuesday, former foreign secretary Madhu Raman Acharya said Nepal needs a strong foreign policy that guides domestic aspiration.

"We are in the process of graduating from an LDC where we can lose concessions and favourable conditions for the competitive advantage that we have been receiving. In this context, Nepal's foreign policy should be in the national interest rather than aligning with any other country's foreign policy."

NP Saud, a former foreign minister, said that economic diplomacy is now the core function and the focus is on foreign direct investment, trade, development cooperation and mobilisation of other resources as well as better connectivity—regionally and globally.

"As reflected in the visit of Nepal's prime minister to India last year, and the visit of the external affairs minister of India to Nepal this year, our relations are moving on a positive trajectory with a focus on economic deliverables of mutual benefit," Saud said.

"We are also utilising significant resources from the Exim Bank of India to develop infrastructure such as road, transmission line and hydropower projects," he said.

"With China, we seek to enhance economic cooperation, trade and connectivity," Saud said.

Saud said that Nepal has a vast network of infrastructure linkages with India that comprises border roads, railways, petroleum pipelines, and transmission lines.

"We are also working to add new dimensions of connectivity like inland waterways. We are continuously working to improve these hardware infrastructures and trade and transit facilitation software at the border."

Vijay Kant Karna, executive chairperson of the Centre for Social Innovation and Foreign Policy, said Nepal can leverage its unique geopolitical position as a bridge between South Asia and beyond to harness economic dividends from trade, investment and technology transfer.



However, the concern remains about how Nepal could adopt a pragmatic foreign policy in today's fast-changing world, he said.

Multi-alignment or strategic alignment is a strategic choice of a large part of the economic growth, and infrastructure development, he said.

"It is necessary to establish the bottom line for our national interest, democratic values, and national security."

**THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 11-3-2024**

**Crucial section of Koshi Corridor  
Transmission Line completed**

*The 35-km section funded through an Indian loan is part of the 110-km transmission line.*

**Post Report**

**KATHMANDU**, An important section of the 220kV Koshi Corridor Transmission Line Project in eastern Nepal has been completed. This section, which is part of the 110-km transmission line, would help evacuate the power from the hydropower projects built along the Tamor river and its tributaries.

The 35-km section of the transmission line connects Basantapur substation in Dharmadevi Municipality of Sankhuwasabha and Dhungesanghu substation at Maiwakhola Rural Municipality of Taplejung, according to the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA).

"It will facilitate the evacuation of power generated by the 73MW Middle Tamor Hydropower Project being developed by Sanima Middle Tamor Hydropower Limited," said Kul Man Ghising, managing director of NEA.

"Power generated by this project will be evacuated via this 35-km transmission line within a few weeks."

According to him, a task of installing a bay at the Basantapur substation is underway to enable evacuation of the power.

A bay in an electrical substation is a key functional unit, which allows for the control, protection, and isolation of electric power equipment, facilitating the safe and efficient operation of the power system.

Besides Middle Tamor, other hydropower projects built along the Tamor river and its tributaries, will be connected with this transmission line and the power will be supplied to Morang and Sunsari districts through Inaruwa substation, according to the NEA.

This transmission line was built under package 3 of the Koshi Corridor Project. This package includes the construction of a 35-km 220 kV transmission line from Dhungesanghu to Basantapur and the construction of a 132-33kV substation at Dhungesanghu District.

The contract was awarded to India's KEC International for Rs24.5 million. Construction of substation is also in the final phase of completion, according to the NEA.

Construction of the transmission line and substation was financed by Export-Import Bank of India.

According to the NEA, the work under package 4 of the project is also underway. This package includes the second circuit stringing of a 35-km long 220 kV transmission line from Dhungesanghu to Basantapur and the construction for four 220kV line bays at the Basantapur Substation.

The contract was awarded to Nepal Hydro & Electric Limited (NHE) in November 2022.

Hailed as a lifeline project in the eastern region, the Koshi corridor project funded through a line of credit worth \$250 million from Export-Import Bank of India, is being built to evacuate power from projects along the Arun River, Tamor River and their tributaries that carry a total generation potential over 2000 MW.

The fifth package of the project will also be undertaken with the Exim Bank of India, according to the NEA. The fifth package includes the second circuit stringing of 106-km long 220 kV transmission line from Tumlingtar to Inaruwa via Baneshwar and Basantapur of Sankhuwasabha district.

Under the first package, a 106-km 220 kV transmission line from Tumlingtar to the Inaruwa Substation extending from Baneshwar to Basantapur of Sankhuwasabha district was implemented. And under the second package, 220kV substations at Inaruwa, Sunsari and Tumlingtar, Baneshwar and Basantapur of Sankhuwasabha were built.

Earlier, in 2018 and 2019 the construction of pylons along the 106-km Inaruwa-Tumlingtar transmission route was obstructed by Dharan Metropolis, which claimed that the pylons would have adverse impact on tourism and paragliding in the area.

**TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 2-3-2024**

**Iran, Russia sign document on health  
cooperation**

**TEHRAN** – A comprehensive document between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation has been signed by Deputy Health Minister Mohammad-Hossein Niknam and his Russian counterpart Sergei Glagolev.

The agreement was signed today (on Friday), during the closing ceremony of the 17th Joint Economic Committee meeting which was held in Tehran. The memorandum of understanding was compiled following several rounds of technical negotiations between the ministries of health of the two countries. It lays the

groundwork for cooperation between the parties in various fields, including joint supply and production of medicines and medical equipment, modern and digital technologies, and academic cooperation, the Health Ministry website reported.

It also involves training health professionals, conducting health research, and managing communicable and non-communicable diseases. During the negotiations, the two parties welcomed the idea of holding annual meetings. The two officials also met on Tuesday, highlighting cooperation in research and education, artificial intelligence, and modern technologies, particularly vaccines and pharmaceutical raw materials, IRIB reported.

### **Russia eyeing more medical imports from Iran**

In May 2023, Heidar Mohammadi, the head of the Food and Drug Administration, met Glagolev in Moscow, saying Russia was seeking to facilitate medical imports from Iran.

“We are determined to have interactions with Russia in the field of health,” IRNA quoted Mohammadi as saying. Mohammadi pointed out that Iran-made medical devices are currently exported to 55 countries around the world. The Russian official, for his part, expressed hope that relations will be enhanced in the field of technology transfer.

“Certainly, we have a lot of motivation to introduce our manufacturers to Iran and also visit Iranian companies to boost cooperation in the future.”

He also expressed his interest in further cooperation in the field of combating infectious diseases and expanding medical tourism.

In October 2022, Hossein Shomali, an official with the Food and Drug Administration said Iran exported medicine worth \$7.5 million to Russia in the [Iranian calendar] year 1400 (March 2021-March 2022).

Biological medicine accounts for a major portion of the products exported from Iran to Russia, ISNA quoted Shomali as saying.

The pharmaceutical industry is one of the active and important industries, which during the past years has been able to meet the domestic need for medicines to an acceptable level with significant growth.

At the same time, one of the solutions for the development of the pharmaceutical industry, considering the large volume of the pharmaceutical consumption market in the world, is the export, he highlighted.

Exporting medicine has advantages such as saving foreign currency and thus facilitating the production cycle with the possibility of importing raw materials, it also can lead to the reduction of production costs, and on the other hand, it can encourage the manufacturing company to improve product quality, he explained.

He went on to say that the export value of the country's pharmaceutical items last year was about \$60 million, which has increased by 30 percent compared to the previous year, which shows the 0.2 percent share of the pharmaceutical industry in export revenue among the different industries of the country. Health Minister Bahram Einollahi has said many countries in the region are asking Iran for help with issues related to health. Emphasizing that all diseases are currently treated in the country, the minister added: “With the help of scientists, we were able to educate efficient human resources,” ISNA reported. Countries that do not have pharmaceutical production infrastructure or have a small share of domestic production compared to their pharmaceutical market, can be a good export target for Iranian companies, he added. The value of Iranian pharmaceutical exports to Russia last year was about \$7.5 million, which is 12.5 percent of the country's total exports, most of which were biomedicine, he said.

MT/MG

### **TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 7-3-2024**

## **Tehran, Tashkent explore avenues of economic cooperation**

**By Ebrahim Fallahi**

**TEHRAN** – During the visit of Uzbek Energy Minister Jurabek Mirzamakhmudov along with an accompanying delegation to Iran, the official met and held talks with several Iranian officials to pursue the expansion of ties between the two countries in a variety of areas.

He met with First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber, Oil Minister Javad Oji, Head of the Trade Promotion Organization Mehdi Zeyghami, Transport and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash, and Energy Minister Ali-Akbar Mehrabian to name a few.

### **Iran ready to export technical, and engineering services to Uzbekistan**

In the meeting with Oji, the Iranian Oil Minister voiced Iran's readiness to export technical and engineering services to Uzbekistan, Shana reported.

Oji said the Iranian companies and manufacturers are ready to participate in Uzbekistan's oil projects.

Iran is currently cooperating with 42 countries in the oil, gas, and petrochemical sectors, said the oil minister, adding Iran's oil industry has become self-sufficient despite unilateral U.S. sanctions and the country's oil and gas fields are developed by domestic knowledge-based companies.

Oji said Iran is drilling oil and gas fields at a depth of 6,000 meters in the absence of foreign experts.

The Uzbek energy minister said he has closely observed Iran's capabilities and achievements in international

energy exhibitions, which displayed its modern oil and gas equipment.

He said Uzbekistan's officials have adequate information about the Iranian companies' great experiences in oil and gas exploration, extraction, transmission, and refining sectors, calling for Iran to share its expertise and technical know-how with his country.

Mirzamakhmudov, who visited Tehran to follow up on the agreements signed by Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and his Iranian counterpart Ebrahim Raisi, said the Uzbek government is keen to expand relations, particularly in the oil sector, with Iran.

#### **Iran calls for strong economic ties with Uzbekistan**

In his talks with Mokhber, the Iranian side underlined the need for strengthened relations with Uzbekistan, saying political interactions remain stable with strong economic support.

Referring to the government's policy of reaching out to neighboring countries, he said that Iran and Uzbekistan can cooperate in different industrial, energy, electricity, transportation, and knowledge-based areas.

He underlined that a preferential trade agreement can help the expansion of relations between the two countries.

The Iranian vice president also called for using national currencies in financial and banking settlements.

In the meantime, the Uzbek minister referred to an earlier meeting between the presidents of the two countries, noting that the two presidents have underlined the need for increasing the volume of bilateral trade from the current \$500 million to \$1 billion and then to \$2 billion in the near future.

#### **Tehran, Tashkent to sign comprehensive transportation document soon**

Transport Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash, in his talks with the Uzbek delegate, emphasized the need for the formation of a joint transport committee, the drawing of a transit road map, and the preparation of a comprehensive transport document between the two countries.

Referring to various meetings between Iran and Uzbekistan officials in the field of transportation, he said: "We consider ourselves committed to implementing the memorandums signed between the two countries, including the agreement signed on the development of the East-West Corridor."

Bazrpash also called for an increase in the number of flights between the two countries and voiced Iran's readiness for participation in Uzbekistan's transportation projects.

#### **Exports to Uzbekistan up 20% in 10 months**

According to TPO, the country's export of non-oil goods to Uzbekistan registered a 20-percent hike in the 10 months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2023, to January 22, 2024).

The head of the Russia and Caucasus Office of the TPO, Akbar Godari, pointed to the visit by the Uzbek minister of energy and his accompanying delegation to Iran and expressed hope that this visit will bring about positive results for the expansion of the trade ties between the two countries.

Godari referred to the achievements of a visit by Iran's Minister of Industry, Mining, and Trade Abbas Aliabadi to the Republic of Uzbekistan last month and said the two sides agreed to pursue the implementation of the agreements inked between the two sides earlier.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Godari pointed to Iran's export of products to Uzbekistan and added that various types of polymer compounds, cables, aquatics, steel profiles, etc. were exported from Iran to Uzbekistan in 2023.

In return, Iran imported cotton thread, potassium, cereals, legumes, pinto beans, and silk thread from the Republic of Uzbekistan last year, he added.

The official put the value of the trade exchanges between Iran and Uzbekistan from March 21, 2023, to January 22, 2024, at more than \$370 million.

Iran exported more than \$270 million of non-oil goods to Uzbekistan, showing a 20 percent growth compared to the same period a year earlier.

According to the statistics, Iran imported about \$100 million of products from the Republic of Uzbekistan in this period, he added.

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### **THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 15-3-2024**

#### **Managing the economy**

*New finance minister has his job cut out for him: jumpstart stalled engines of the domestic economy to put it on a path to sustainable growth*

We are finally there: a new elected government is in place and a new economy czar has been anointed. The surprise choice for the finance minister's portfolio, Muhammad Aurangzeb, is a familiar face among global banking and finance circles. His selection reflects the no-nonsense approach to economic management the coalition government has decided to take, which is a good omen. A Wharton alumnus who most recently headed Pakistan's HBL, Aurangzeb has previously been associated with prestigious global financial services

brands as a top-tier executive and is probably the only Pakistani executive to sit on the Dow Jones' influential Global CEO Council. But probably the best thing about Aurangzeb is that he has zero political pretensions to distract him from the job on hand because he will have no constituency to serve except the cabinet as he tackles the convoluted task of putting Pakistan's economy back on the rails.

The new finance minister has his job cut out for him: jumpstart the stalled engines of the domestic economy to put it on a path to sustainable growth. There is no reason why a healthy, growing economy should not be able to return a positive current account balance and service its debts, which should in turn strengthen the currency and put the brakes on inflation. There is no doubt that Pakistan's real economy is in tatters after years of mismanagement and stagnation, and it will take more than band-aids to get back into shape. Equally, the country's unsustainably high external debt is a huge drain on what little resources the sputtering economy can generate, leaving the nation at the mercy of the global financial markets. Aurangzeb will need to find and implement innovative ways to effectively manage the debt burden.

Fiscal consolidation is another key challenge the new finance minister will have to face in the course of his job. This will involve both bringing government spending under control by cutting the rot and keeping unfunded subsidies at bay and increasing revenue by broadening the tax base and improving collection. Bringing the rent-seeking farm and retail sectors under the tax net are two long overdue steps in the right direction, as is the task of oiling the wheels of the snail-paced privatization program. His biggest test will be boosting exports by creating a business-friendly environment to attract foreign investment with a strong focus on foreign direct investment. Pakistan's general economic policy direction has been right through the last two short-lived governments, although progress has been slow on account of the very nature of those governments and the political challenges that beset them. Aurangzeb's job will be to maintain that policy direction and accelerate progress. The government will no doubt have a hard time juggling competing priorities like a central bank insisting on monetary tightening and an electorate begging for easy money. The finance minister would do well to mind his turf when throwing around his weight in such matters. In particular, he must remember dictating monetary policy is strictly off-limits for him.

In the final reckoning, however, his success in arriving at and implementing the right policy mix will not only entail a whole-of-government approach but also require close cooperation between all stakeholders including the government and the private sector and strong political ownership by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and his

political coalition. Equally, the finance minister will be constrained in his job by other exogenous factors like the global economic slowdown and the evolving geopolitical situation. Given his experience as a top-flight banker, Aurangzeb cannot be oblivious to how the headwinds the global is facing can impact Pakistan's exports and foreign investment or how the ongoing regional conflicts can affect the country's trade and investment. One hopes he can find strategies to effectively cope with these and other challenges facing him on the job.

#### **THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 4-3-2024**

### **Pak-China cooperation to explore chemical industry digitalisation**

#### **Agencies**

**BEIJING** - Commercial Counsellor of the Embassy of Pakistan in China, Ghulam Qadir led a Pakistani delegation to visit TDD E-commerce Company, a chemical e-commerce platform under IBI Guolian providing digital supply chain and industrial big data services.

The two parties engaged in discussions and exchanges regarding potential cooperation in chemical industry, with the aim of jointly building a digital trading service platform. During the visit, the delegation toured the data center and the Guolian Cloud Digital Experience Hall, where they gained in-depth insights into TDD's operational model, business scope, as well as the technical capabilities and application scenarios of the Guolian Cloud, according to local media. In the subsequent discussions, the two sides explored various possibilities for international cooperation, primarily focusing on the joint construction of a digital trading service platform, a localized B2B e-commerce platform and a China-Pakistan digital supply chain service system.

Ghulam Qadir stated during the discussions, "Pakistan will soon launch economic zones and industrial parks to provide a favourable business environment and strong support for enterprises. The achievements of TDD platform in the digital transformation of chemical industry are commendable. Leveraging TDD's operational experience and advantages in the entire industry chain, we want to jointly create an international one-stop full-chain service for various industries in Pakistan." Liu Zhai, CEO of TDD, provided a detailed introduction of the TDD platform and its global strategic layout. She also shared views on the development of TDD's cross-border e-commerce and the current business operations in Pakistan. Integrating the upstream and downstream segments of the chemical industry chain in Pakistan is an important strategic layout for TDD's cross-border e-commerce. To do that,

TDD will cooperate with Pakistani enterprises and continuously expand the scope of services. Cooperating with the Belt and Road Initiative countries, we are also vigorously expand a global supply chain based on the industrial internet platform, she added. In March, TDD will send a delegation to participate in the Pakistan Coating Show 2024 and conduct market research on the local chemical industry. TDD will organise various activities, including visits to Pakistani companies, exchanges with associations and governments, together with other Chinese enterprises of the industry.

### **GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 1-3-2024**

## **China reports 'hard-won' economic results for 2023, as two sessions to focus on continued recovery**

*'Hard-won' results in 2023 lay solid foundation for continued recovery*

**By Wang Cong, Li Xuanmin and Ma Jingjing**

China on Thursday released the statistical communique on national economic and social development in 2023, reaffirming that the Chinese economy maintained recovery momentum and made solid progress in pursuing high-quality development despite internal and external challenges.

Coming just days before China kicks off the annual two sessions, one of the most important political gathering each year, the communique, which drew a more comprehensive picture of the Chinese economy in 2023, laid a solid foundation for economic recovery in 2024 and provided valuable signals for where the Chinese economy is headed and top policy priorities for the year, analysts noted.

A slew of social and economic development goals for 2024 will be set at the annual legislative and political consultative sessions, with the GDP growth target among the most closely watched. Chinese national lawmakers, political advisers and analysts said that the focus will be on further consolidating economic recovery and continuing efforts to pursue high-quality development. Some economists expect the GDP growth target to be set at around 5 percent for 2024.

China's economy grew by 5.2 percent year-on-year in 2023, according to the statistical communique released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on Thursday, reaffirming the figure released in January and staying above the official GDP growth target of around 5 percent in 2023. Meanwhile, the per capita GDP in 2023 increased by 5.4 percent over the previous year.

The statistical communique "highlighted the upward trajectory of the Chinese economy forging ahead with wave-like development despite pressure and depicted a vivid picture of Chinese modernization laying a solid foundation, gathering steam, and making progress while maintaining stability," Sheng Laiyun, deputy director of the NBS, wrote in an article analyzing the statistical communique.

Sheng further pointed out that currently and for a good period in the future, China's development faces and will continue to face both strategic opportunities as well as risks and challenges, "but the opportunities outweigh the challenges and the favorable conditions outweigh the unfavorable factors."

### **Eye on two sessions**

With the complete picture of China's social and economic development released, all eyes are now turning to the upcoming two sessions, which will offer a crucial window into how the country sets various development goals and how it plans to achieve them.

The second session of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC), China's top legislature, and the second session of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the country's top political advisory body, will open on March 5 and 4, respectively. Collectively, they are known as the two sessions. One of the top items on the agenda during the two sessions is the government work report, which is expected to be delivered to the plenum of the NPC's second session and contain a flurry of policy goals this year.

Underscoring the importance of the report, the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee met on Thursday to discuss the draft government work report, which will be submitted by the State Council at the top legislature's annual session in March for deliberation, according to Xinhua.

It was noted at the meeting that over the past year, in the face of an exceptionally complicated international environment and the arduous tasks of reform, development and maintaining stability, China has achieved a smooth transition in its COVID-19 response and has seen economic recovery and growth.

"The government work report will coordinate development and security, supply-side structural reform and insufficient effective demand, strategic tasks of Chinese modernization, and reform and opening up so as to promote high-quality development of the economy," Yu Miaojie, a deputy to the NPC and president of Liaoning University, told the Global Times.

Yu said that China's GDP growth rate is expected to reach 5.3 to 5.4 percent in 2024 despite headwinds and choppy waters in the international environment and challenging tasks in promoting reform and development at home. In addition to the GDP growth target, Yu also expects the deficit-to-GDP ratio will be set at 3 percent for 2024.

Zhou Hongyi, a member of the National Committee of the CPPCC and founder and chairman of 360 Security Technology, said that another main focus will be on forming new productive forces, which aims to use scientific and technological innovation to drive productivity.

"In the context of a new round of scientific and technological revolution and accelerated industrial transformation, our country insists on placing scientific and technological innovation at the core of the country's overall development," Zhou told the Global Times.

Chinese top officials have been stressing the need to pursue sci-tech breakthroughs and develop new productive forces, as the economy undergoes a profound transformation and faces a deteriorating external environment marked by the US' relentless campaign to contain China's economic and technological rise.

A key issue to watch out for is how policymakers plan to tackle various challenges and risks, while also pushing ahead key reforms, economists said.

"Preventing risks and promoting reform need to be carried out simultaneously. We still need to introduce more measures to resolve local debt risks. At the same time, the international environment is in a state of turbulence. How China plans to carry out high-quality development and promote high-level opening-up is also drawing great global attention," Wan Zhe, an economist and professor at the Belt and Road School of Beijing Normal University, told the Global Times on Thursday.

In terms of the official GDP growth target, Wan said, judging from targets set by localities during the local two sessions, which averaged a growth rate of 5.4 percent, the Government Work Report will likely set a growth target of around 5 percent. "This is a relatively high target, indicating that the central government has high confidence in the market," she said.

Zhang Shuibo, an NPC deputy and a professor at the College of Management and Economics of Tianjin University, said that tackling overcapacity and improving the business environment are also at the top of the agenda for 2024, in line with top priorities set during the Central Economic Work Conference.

"As long as we make the business environment better and keep a stable policy environment," businesses will have greater expectations for making profits, despite the impact of other factors, Zhang told the Global Times on Thursday.

Despite lingering downward pressure, China's economic recovery is off to a great start this year. In a striking example, record-high figures for domestic travel and spending were recorded during the Chinese Lunar New Year holidays, with both figures also largely exceeding those of the same period in 2019 before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 3-3-2024**

## **China's economic activity rebounds in 2023: IMF**

**BEIJING, March 2 (Xinhua) --** China's economic activity rebounded in 2023 following the post-COVID reopening with real GDP estimated to have grown broadly in line with the authorities' growth target of around 5 percent, the executive board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has said. The IMF made the statement in a recent press release after concluding its annual Article IV review of the Chinese economy.

According to the statement published on the IMF website, the recovery was driven by domestic demand, particularly private consumption, and assisted by supportive macroeconomic policies, including the further relaxation of monetary policy, tax relief for firms and households, and fiscal spending on disaster relief. The statement said that while inflation fell in 2023, largely due to decreased energy and food prices, it is expected to increase gradually to 1.3 percent in 2024 as the output gap narrows and the base effects of commodity prices recede.

Decisive policy action, including accelerated restructuring in the property sector, could boost confidence and lead to a better-than-expected rebound in private investment, the statement said.

An IMF team visited China from Oct. 26 to Nov. 7 to undertake the 2023 Article IV consultation. The team held constructive discussions with senior officials from the government and the People's Bank of China, as well as private sector representatives and academics, to exchange views on China's economic prospects and risks, reform progress and challenges, and policy responses.

<b>DEFENCE, NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT, SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND SPACE TECHNOLOGY</b>				
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**THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 15-3-2024**

## **US sends Letter of Acceptance to India for Predator drone purchase**

**Shishir Gupta**

**New Delhi:** India and US have further cemented defence cooperation with the Biden administration sending the final letter of acceptance (LOA) to the Defence Ministry for acquisition of 31 MQ9B Predator drones from General Atomics through the government to government route. The US sent the classified LOA for the nearly \$4 bn acquisition to India this week. According to officials based in Washington and Delhi, the final LOA, with the negotiated price of 31 armed drones by US with the manufacturer, was sent to the Defence Ministry on March 11, belying reports that the deal was held up by the Biden Administration after the alleged plot to assassinate Khalistani radical G S Pannun. The US State Department notified the drone deal on February 1, but the draft LOA was kept open for possible objections from US lawmakers for a mandatory 30 days. The final LOA was sent to India after there were no vetoes from the lawmakers to the US deal with India. Now that the LOA has been received the deal will be studied by the Indian Navy, the lead player in the acquisition, and then forwarded to the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) for approval via the Defence Minister if the price is found to be satisfactory. The Indian Navy will get 16 MQ 9B drones, and the Indian Army and Indian Air Force will get eight each as per the agreement between the armed forces. India has decided to purchase 31 drones with 171 Hell-fire AGM 114 R missiles, laser guided bombs, missile launchers, ground stations, anti-submarine sonobuoys and the full encryption as well as surveillance complement package for the state of the art platform. The letter of acceptance is a response to India sending a letter of intent to purchase 31 drones to the US government. Under the G-to-G route, it is the supplying government that negotiates with the manufacturer on price.

The acquisition of the 31 Predator drones by India came at a time when the lease of two Sky Guardian drones (unarmed Predators) by the Indian Navy was on the verge of expiring in January. This was first extended till March, and then a contract for further extension for four years was signed this month at a cost of \$ 220-230 million.

Analysts say the India-US MQ9B deal will be a game changer in the Indo-Pacific, serving as an effective counter to the Chinese Wing Loong II armed drones, which have also been sold by Beijing to its client state Pakistan.

**THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 10-3-2024**

## **Tri-service drill to demonstrate firepower**

**Tribune News Service**

**New Delhi,** The Army, IAF and the Navy will demonstrate the prowess of indigenous equipment and integrated firepower during tri-service exercise ‘Bharat Shakti’ at Pokhran in Rajasthan on March 12.

Indigenous equipment like Light Combat Aircraft Tejas, ALH Mk-IV copters, T90 tanks, Dhanush artillery guns, K9 Vajra artillery guns and Pinaka will be part of the drill. It exercise will demonstrate the “shock and awe” that the armed forces seek to achieve in an operational situation by effectively employing manoeuvre and fighting capabilities, a top Army officer said today. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected witness the exercise.

Major General CS Mann, Additional Director General, Army Design Bureau, said ‘Bharat Shakti’ would also demonstrate the capabilities of the three services’ indigenously built defence equipment.

**THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-3-2024**

## **India tests Agni-V with MIRV tech, sixth to enter elite club**

**Ajay Banerjee**

**New Delhi,** India’s strategic prowess received a further boost today as it tested a new variant of its nuclear-tipped Agni-V missile that’s capable of firing warheads at multiple targets at a distance greater than 5,000 km.

Called the Multiple Independently Targetable Re-Entry Vehicle (MIRV) technology, it allows a single missile to carry multiple warheads and strike at different locations independently. Without the MIRV technology, a missile can hit only one target for which is programmed.

The importance of today’s test was announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi: “Proud of our DRDO scientists for Mission Divyastra, the first flight-test of indigenously developed Agni-V missile with MIRV technology.”

Sources explained the improvement in technology, saying the warheads on the missile needed to be programmed separately with each of these capable of hitting targets that could be a few hundred km apart. “A missile carrying MIRV is used to deceive enemy radars that would read it as a single missile and fire a counter-missile accordingly. The MIRV would then deploy in the last stage, leaving very little reaction time,” said an official.

With the test, India has joined the select group of nations — US, UK, Russia, China and France — that have MIRV capability in terms of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). Pakistan recently tested Ababeel, a medium-range MIRV-capable missile with its range below 3,000 km (lower than an ICBM). The nuclear forces of the country are under the Strategic Forces Command, which reports to the Prime Minister. After April 2012, India has tested the Agni-V about 10 times, but it's the first with MIRV technology.

The Agni-V system is equipped with indigenous avionics technology and high-accuracy sensor packages, which ensure that the re-entry vehicles reach the target points with the desired accuracy. The missile uses a three-stage solid-fuelled engine. The development and deployment of MIRV technology are sensitive and closely guarded subjects. It was first developed by the US in the 1960s during the Cold War.

### **Mission Divyastra**

India tests DRDO-developed Agni-V with Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV) technology

With new technology, multiple warheads can be fired to different targets from the same missile on Agni-V platform

Nuclear-capable Agni-V has a range of 5,000 km, making India contender for intercontinental ballistic missile long-range category

India is sixth nation after US, UK, China, France and Russia to have the technology

### **How MIRV-propelled missile works**

After launch, an MIRV-equipped missile follows a normal ballistic trajectory into lower space, similar to any other missile

Each warhead on MIRV, however, can be assigned a different trajectory and target

The warheads re-enter the Earth's atmosphere independently and proceed to their respective targets

### **THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 12-3-2024**

## **One missile, many weapons: What makes the latest Agni-V special**

**Amitabh Sinha**

India on Monday (March 11) announced that it had **successfully tested a new Agni-V missile** capable of carrying multiple warheads and striking multiple targets. The most important thing about this new missile is its integration with what is known as the MIRV technology.

MIRV (Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle) technology is the capability that allows

multiple warheads to be loaded on a single missile delivery system and programmed to hit different targets, thus greatly enhancing the missile's destructive potential.

The development of MIRV capability marks a significant upgrade for India's missile systems, and expands its nuclear options.

What is MIRV technology?

Traditional missiles carry a single warhead, or weapon, that goes and hits the intended target. MIRV-equipped missiles can accommodate multiple warheads, each of which can be programmed to strike a separate target. They can all be made to hit the same location too, one after the other, thus ensuring complete annihilation of the target.

While simultaneous strikes at multiple locations can have a debilitating impact on the enemy, the use of nuclear warheads can bring the opposition to its knees.

The technology is not new. It was developed in the 1960s and first deployed in the 1970s by the United States and the then Soviet Union. But it is a complicated technology. The warheads have to be miniaturised, be equipped with independent guidance and navigation controls, and released sequentially from the delivery system.

Over the years, France, the United Kingdom, and eventually China have developed this technology. Pakistan too has claimed to have tested an MIRV-equipped missile called Ababeel, first in 2017 and then in 2023.

The development of MIRV capability marks a significant upgrade for India's missile systems, and expands its nuclear options.

The number of warheads that a missile can carry depends on its design, weight, size, range and other parameters. The one that India tested on Monday can carry three to four warheads, V K Saraswat, the former head of Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), said. There are other systems that can carry as many as 15 warheads, or even more.

However, an MIRV-equipped missile has never been used so far in any conflict situation. Arms control advocates argue that MIRV technology incentivises the urge to strike first, thus increasing the risk from nuclear weapons.

Advantages of MIRV technology

Apart from the obvious advantage of inflicting multiple damages with a single strike, MIRV is a sought-after military technology for several other reasons. One of them is its ability to penetrate missile defence systems.

A missile defence system is a network of technologies aimed at detecting, tracking, intercepting and destroying an incoming missile. It involves the deployment of

sophisticated radars, communication systems, and interceptor missiles. It's considered a good safeguard against traditional missiles, and several countries are in the process of developing or strengthening their missile defence systems.

MIRV-equipped missiles, however, can render the system useless. Multiple warheads, each with an independent trajectory, can make the job of tracking and intercepting extremely complicated. In addition, MIRV-equipped missiles can be made to carry decoy warheads to confuse the defence system. It is thus very likely that one or more warheads penetrate the shield created by the defence system, and inflict damage.

Another key strategic benefit, especially for countries like India which has a no-first use policy for nuclear weapons, is the capability to cause crippling damage in a response strike. The response strike could be disproportionate, and can thus serve as a deterrence to the enemy.

Agni upgrade

The integration of MIRV technology is a long-awaited upgrade for the Agni family of short, medium and intercontinental range ballistic missiles indigenously developed by the DRDO. Agni missiles are the main land-based delivery systems for India's nuclear weapons.

Developed in the 1990s, the first-generation Agni missiles were deployed in the armed forces in the mid-2000s. Agni-I to Agni-IV missiles have ranges between 700 to 3,500 km and can carry single payloads weighing between 12 and 40 kilotons. Agni-V, the version that has been equipped with MIRV technology, can travel more than 5,000 km, and can potentially enter the intercontinental range as well, considered to be 5,500 km and above.

Agni-V has been tested several times since 2012, with new features and capabilities. Its previous flight happened in December 2022, when its night-time capabilities were tested, among other things.

Meanwhile, DRDO has also been developing Agni-P missiles, which are modernised versions of the short-range Agni-1 and Agni-2 variety. This missile was tested twice in 2021, and on both occasions there was the expectation that it would be integrated with MIRV technology.

The acquisition of MIRV technology by India was keenly awaited after China developed it in the last decade. With Pakistan also claiming to have tested a missile with this technology, integrating this in Agni missiles had become an imperative. The next generation Agni-VI missile, currently under development, is also expected to be equipped with MIRV.

The development was significant enough for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to himself tell the nation about

it, much like he had done five years earlier when DRDO had successfully carried out an anti-satellite test, an equally notable technological achievement that put India among a handful of nations with the capability to strike at an enemy's space-based assets, such as satellites.

Monday's test was carried out from Dr APJ Abdul Kalam Island, off the coast of Odisha, which hosts India's integrated missile test range. "Various telemetry and radar stations tracked and monitored multiple re-entry vehicles. The mission accomplished the designed parameters," DRDO said in a statement.

**THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 7-3-2024**

## **India raises first MH-60R sqn in Kochi; Navy chief hails capabilities**

**Rahul Singh**

*The helicopters will strengthen the navy's anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare and surveillance capabilities*

Navy chief Admiral R Kari Kumar on Wednesday hailed the navy's new MH-60Rs as among the most potent multi-role helicopters in the world, saying they will significantly enhance India's maritime capabilities to secure its national interests.

"As far as Indian Navy is concerned, we have an unequivocal commitment to the country --- of protecting, preserving, promoting and pursuing national interests in the maritime domain. With their cutting-edge sensors and multi-mission capabilities, the MH-60Rs will augment our maritime surveillance and anti-submarine warfare capabilities," he said as the navy raised its first squadron of the MH-60R Seahawk helicopters, imported from the US, at INS Garuda in Kochi.

The Seahawk squadron was raised with the six helicopters thus far delivered to the navy. India ordered 24 Lockheed Martin-Sikorsky MH-60R multi-role helicopters from the US four years ago to modernise its ageing helicopter fleet. The helicopters will strengthen the navy's anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare and surveillance capabilities.

All helicopters will be delivered by 2025.

The new squadron was commissioned as INAS (Indian Naval Air Squadron) 334, commanded by Captain M Abhishek Ram. The Seahawk is the maritime variant of the Black Hawk helicopter. The helicopter has been rigorously tested in Indian conditions and is fully integrated into the naval fleet, and their advanced weapons, sensors and avionics make them ideal for the Indian Navy's maritime security needs.

The highlight of the ceremony was a fly-past by a formation of the Seahawks and the traditional water

cannon salute to mark the historic moment, the navy said in a statement.

The helicopter is designed for anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare, search and rescue, medical evacuation and vertical replenishment.

The navy received its first two MH-60R choppers at Kochi two years ago. The helicopters are expected to be the mainstay of the navy's anti-submarine warfare, anti-ship warfare and airborne early-warning capabilities in the coming decades.

Armed with AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, MK 54 torpedoes and advanced precision weapons, the twin-engine helicopters can operate from frigates, destroyers and aircraft carriers.

"The commissioning of the advanced MH-60R helicopters by the Indian Navy marks the beginning of a new era of collaboration and partnership between the US Navy, the Indian Navy and Lockheed Martin. Our collaboration with India is rooted in a shared dedication to maritime security and ensuring a safe and open Indo-Pacific. As the proud manufacturer of the helicopters, we are committed to equipping the Indian Navy with state-of-the-art solutions to meet their 21st century security challenges," said Air Vice Marshal Michael Fernandez (retd), country head, Lockheed Martin India. The navy first moved a case to buy multi-role helicopters, a critical operational necessity, around 18 years ago. The government-to-government contract for the MH-60R helicopters is worth around ₹17,500 crore.

"The MH-60R helicopter will enhance India's blue-water capabilities, extending the operational reach of the navy and supporting sustained naval operations across spectrums and over vast maritime domains. The Seahawk's deployment in the Indian Ocean region will strengthen the Indian Navy's maritime presence, dissuading potential threats and ensuring a secure and safe environment in this strategically crucial region," the navy said in statement earlier this week.

#### **THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 14-3-2024**

### **MoD inks contracts worth Rs8,073 cr with HAL to procure 34 advanced light helicopters**

**PTI**

The defence ministry on Wednesday signed two contracts with a combined value of Rs 8,073 crore with the Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd for acquisition of 34 advanced light helicopters and associated equipment for the Indian Army and the Coast Guard.

Out of 34 Dhruv Mk-III helicopters, the Army will get 25 and the Coast Guard will receive nine, according to the ministry.

MoD signs contracts worth Rs 8073 Cr with HAL for acquisition of 34 Advanced Light Helicopters (ALH) Dhruv Mk III for Indian Army & Indian Coast Guard

The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) had cleared the two procurement projects last week.

"Consequent upon approval of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), the Ministry of Defence signed two contracts for a combined value of Rs 8073.17 crore with the HAL on March 13 for acquisition of 34 Advanced Light Helicopters (ALH) Dhruv Mk III along with operational role equipment for Indian Army (25 ALHs) and Indian Coast Guard (09 ALHs) under Buy (Indian-IDDMM) category," the ministry said.

It described the acquisition under the Indian-IDDMM (Indigenously Designed, Developed and Manufactured) category as a significant move towards indigenisation in defence manufacturing.

The ALH Dhruv Mk III UT (Utility) — the Indian Army version — is designed for search and rescue, transportation of troops and casualty evacuation among other roles.

It has proved its performance in high altitude regions like Siachen Glacier and Ladakh, the ministry said in a statement.

The ALH Mk III MR (Maritime Role), the ICG version, is designed for maritime surveillance, search and rescue, rappelling operations and also for transportation of troops.

It has proved its mettle even in adverse atmospheric conditions over sea and land, the ministry said.

"The project will generate employment of an estimated 190 Lakh man-hours during its duration. It will also entail supply of equipment from more than 200 MSMEs and 70 local vendors will be involved in the indigenisation process which is likely to have a positive impact on employment generation in this sector," it said.

#### **THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 2-3-2024**

### **Data from India's highest space observatory in Ladakh helped track 2023's most intense solar storm**

*In late April 2023, a severe geomagnetic storm in Earth's magnetosphere led to a vivid display of aurora in lower latitudes extending to places like Ladakh*

**Vijay Mohan**

**Chandigarh,** Data generated by India's highest deep space observatory located in Ladakh has helped astronomers to track the solar source of the most intense geomagnetic storm to hit Earth last year.

In late April 2023, a severe geomagnetic storm in the Earth's magnetosphere led to a vivid display of the

aurora in lower latitudes extending to places like Ladakh. The auroral light was captured by all sky cameras located at the Indian Astronomical Observatory at Hanle in Ladakh.

Astronomers found that the rotation of the filament structure when it was near the Sun was the leading cause behind this solar storm which resulted in a strong effect on the Earth, according to information shared by the Ministry of Science and Technology on Friday.

The Sun often ejects ionized gas, also known as plasma, and magnetic fields in the form of coronal mass ejections (CMEs) into inter-planetary space. When these CMEs encounter planets such as Earth, they interact with the planetary magnetic fields resulting in major magnetic storms.

Accelerated particles and geomagnetic storms can adversely affect human technology on Earth and in space. Thus, understanding and predicting CMEs has both scientific and practical importance.

A large-scale CME eruption originated from the 'Active Region – 13283' located near the solar disk center at midnight on April 21, 2023, resulting in the most intense geomagnetic storm of "Solar Cycle – 25'.

The CME was launched at a speed of about 1,500 kms per second and encountered the near-Earth environment on April 23 at 12:30 PM. Consequently, a severe geomagnetic storm commenced an hour later on Earth.

"Surprisingly, since the CME was launched from a weak magnetic field region on the Sun, such intense geomagnetic storms are unexpected. This is because the energization process is expected to be slower and the formation of twisted magnetic flux is also unlikely," Dr P. Vemareddy, the author of the study undertaken by the Indian Institute of Astrophysics, explained in a statement issued by the Ministry.

Further, CME is associated with a pre-existing magnetized plasma filament in the source active region on the Sun. The magnetic fields evolve with the changing sign of its helicity a few hours before the eruption, which could be the prime destabilizing factor of the magnetic field equilibrium in the solar atmosphere.

This study indicates the importance of having a complete picture of CMEs, including their magnetic structure and the mechanisms involved in their origin from the solar source regions, their evolution, and their propagation from the Sun to the Earth, according to the ministry.

Researchers are also looking forward to using the observations of the Sun provided by India's recently launched space observatory, Aditya - L1, which provides both remote as well as in situ observations, enabling experts to understand the CME launch on the Sun as well as its arrival at the near-Earth space. "In

particular, imaging observations close to the Sun are crucial to determine the orientation and speed of the CME," Dr Vemareddy said.

**THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 5-3-2024**

## **Isro identifies 48 backup points for safe return of Gaganyaan astronauts**

**Soumya Pillai**

*In an ideal situation, Gaganyaan is marked to land in Arabian Sea where Indian agencies will be stationed to rescue the crew and the module, officials said.*

The Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) has identified 48 backup points across the world where the Gaganyaan crew could splash down to ensure a safe recovery and rescue of the astronauts during the return mission, senior officials said.

In an ideal situation, the Gaganyaan module is marked to land in Arabian Sea where Indian agencies will be station to rescue the crew and the module, the officials said. However, in case of a deviation in the main plan, the space agency has identified 48 back up sites in international waters, they said. "In any mission, there is an ideal scenario and there are back-up plans in case that is not achieved. For Gaganyaan mission, if everything goes by the book, we will be able to land the module in the Indian waters," a senior Isro official associated with the mission said.

"But since this is a human spaceflight, we cannot take any chance to ensure the safety of the crew and therefore we have marked possible points where the capsule could land. Even a minor variation in the mission can lead to the capsule landing hundreds of kilometres away," the official said requesting anonymity.

The Gaganyaan mission, India's first human spaceflight project, aims to demonstrate Isro's human spaceflight capability by launching a crew of three members to an orbit of 400km for a three-day mission and bringing them back safely.

The official also said that the space agency had initially finalised two landing spots in Indian waters, one in the Arabian sea and the other in the Bay of Bengal. However, considering the rough waters and the unpredictability of the Bay of Bengal, the landing site in the Arabian Sea was finalised. "The progress for Gaganyaan mission is moving at a satisfactory pace. We are confident that we will be able to conduct at least one uncrewed mission this year before the final mission is undertaken," the official added. Leading up to the actual manned mission, the space agency will be conducting several rounds of tests to ensure the systems are safe to carry and bring back astronauts safely to Earth. Last week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced the

four astronauts designated selected by the Indian Air Force for the mission.

Indian Airforce group captain Prashant Balakrishnan Nair, group captain Ajit Krishnan, group captain Angad Pratap and wing commander Subhanshu Shukla have been training for the Gaganyaan mission for the last five years in Russian and Indian facilities.

Out of the four astronaut designates, three will be selected to fly in the final mission, which is expected to take flight by 2025.

**THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 8-3-2024**

**After Chandrayaan-3, Isro eyes return moon missions**

**Soumya Pillai**

*Isro is gearing up for a return lunar mission, where samples from the Moon will be brought back for the first time.*

The Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) is gearing up for a return lunar mission, where samples from the Moon will be brought back for the first time, officials from the agency said, setting the stage for the next leap in the country's space programme after the success of the Chandrayaan-3 mission last year.

The mission is expected to take flight by 2027 or 2028, the officials said. "We are currently focusing on return lunar missions, which might take shape by 2027 or 2028," Isro chairman S Somanath said.

The technology for such missions was tested during the Chandrayaan-3 mission including the hop experiment where the lander Vikram was powered again and landed at a spot different from its initial location of landing.

The propulsion module of the spacecraft also returned to the Earth's orbit to test its capabilities for a return mission, the Isro chief said.

On August 23 last year, the Indian space agency created history by successfully landing the Chandrayaan-3 spacecraft near the lunar south pole, a feat that had not been achieved by any other country.

The fourth lunar mission aims to collect samples from the lunar surface, demonstrate docking and undocking capabilities in the lunar orbit, demonstrate transfer of samples from one module to another, and to ensure that the module safely re-enters Earth and deliver the collected samples, senior Isro officials said.

Isro officials also said that unlike the previous Chandrayaan missions, the fourth mission will likely be launched in two phases, and on board two launch vehicles — Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) and the Launch Vehicle Mark-3, which was formerly known as the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle Mk-3.

The mission will also have five modules this time — the propulsion module, descender module, ascender module, transfer module and re-entry module.

Like previous missions, the propulsion module will guide the craft till the lunar orbit; the descender module will help the craft make a controlled landing on the lunar surface just like the lander module did for Chandrayaan-3; after the mission experiments and sample collection, the ascender module will be relaunched and begin its journey back to Earth; the transfer module will eject the ascender module from the lunar orbit and detach itself before the module enters the Earth orbit from where the re-entry orbit will take over and guide the samples to Earth.

The Chandrayaan-3 spacecraft had only three modules — the propulsion module, the lander module and the rover module. While the propulsion module ejected itself in the lunar orbit, the lander and rover module conducted a slew of experiments on the lunar surface.

Isro's heavier launch vehicle, LVM-3, is likely to carry three modules, while PSLV, which launched Chandrayaan-3, will launch two modules in the upcoming mission, the space agency said in its mission documents.

**SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 3-3-2024**

**Sri Lanka, US sign Nuclear Security pact**

Sri Lanka and the United States have inked a nuclear security agreement aimed at detecting and intercepting illicit trafficking of special nuclear material and other radioactive substances.

This move comes as part of broader efforts to tackle escalating global security risks. The Sri Lankan Navy formalised an MoU with the US National Nuclear Security Administration at the Navy headquarters in Colombo.

The MoU was signed in the presence of the US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Julie Chung, and the Commander of the Sri Lanka Navy, Vice Admiral Priyantha Perera. Ambassador Chung expressed on X that the partnership between the United States and Sri Lanka in tackling global security threats continues to strengthen over time.

She said that the MoU between the Sri Lanka Navy and the US Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration will enhance their collaborative endeavours to combat illicit maritime trafficking in nuclear and radioactive material. The MoU outlined bilateral collaboration aimed at detecting and intercepting illicit trafficking in nuclear materials and other radioactive substances.

The cooperation involves technical and methodological support, including the installation and enhancement of technical systems to detect and identify such materials at border crossing control points in Sri Lanka.

This agreement underscores the growing partnership between the two countries in addressing global security threats. With technical and methodological cooperation outlined in the MoU, including the installation of advanced detection systems at Sri Lanka's border control points, the initiative marks a significant step towards bolstering nuclear security measures.

### **DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 14-3-2024**

#### **Special Explosive Ordnance Disposal Equipment under Chinese Grant Delivered to Army**

The Sri Lanka Army yesterday (13 Mar) gratefully accepted a stock of special Explosive Ordnance Disposal Equipment, which had been gifted to the Ministry of Defence under the Chinese Military Grant scheme during a simple formal ceremony, headed by His Excellency Qi Zhenhong, the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China in Sri Lanka, General Kamal Gunaratne Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and Lieutenant General Vikum Liyanage, the Commander of the Army at the Army Headquarters.

The formal signing of documents, related to the grant of equipment took place between His Excellency Qi Zhenhong and General Kamal Gunaratne. Subsequently, eighteen REOD 4000 Explosive Ordnance Disposal medium robots, eighteen REOD 400 Explosive Ordnance Disposal robots, ten Anti Explosive Blankets and ten Explosion Protection Tanks and Vehicles were symbolically handed over to the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence then presented them to the Commander of the Army.

### **DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 7-3-2024**

#### **Wings of Fire becomes Wings of Friendship: Unity Takes Flight**

**Ananth Palakidnar**

The Sri Lanka Air Force has chosen the city of Jaffna to include in its 73rd-anniversary celebration by organising an exhibition of the SLAF at the historic Muttravali area around the Dutch Fort of Jaffna.

“Hats off” to SLAF Chief Air Marshal Udeni Rajapaksa, who would have been one of the “Dare Devil” pilots engaged in dealing with one of the deadliest militant organisations in the world, LTTE, for nearly four decades, towards selecting Jaffna to host the

SLAF exhibition to mark its seven decades of success story.

It was from the mid-eighties, with the escalation of arms struggle in the North and East, that SLAF aircraft played a pivotal role in curtailing the militant activities as well as ensuring the essential supplies to the Armed Forces based in the Northern Province.

#### **Reconnaissance purposes**

The history of the Palaly Airport, which has now become an International Airport in Sri Lanka, dates back to the British period in the Island. The Palaly Airport was built during World War II. The British had chosen Palaly not only to expand their Royal Air Force activities on the Island but also for reconnaissance purposes to monitor enemy aircraft such as those from Japan from the Eastern area. Along with Palaly Airport in the North, the RAF had also established another Airport in Vavuniya to support its airborne activities in the Northern part of Sri Lanka.

The RAF aircraft used during World War II can now only be seen as exhibits in London and in Colombo. Whereas not only the RAF pilots but also the SLAF pilots consider Palaly Airport tarmac as one of the best in the world to land the aircraft as well as to take off. The reason is that the Palaly runway has been paved above limestone terrain and when an aircraft lands on the Palaly runway, the pilot could feel the smoothness of the landing.

Not only the SLAF pilots, even the Indian Air Force (IAF) pilots who were stationed in Palaly during the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) operations from 1987 to 1990 were also full of praise for the Palaly runways. So it could be very well said that it was appropriate to select Jaffna by Air Marshal Udeni Rajapaksa to conduct the SLAF's 73rd-anniversary celebration themed “Wings of Friendship”.

On the other hand, apart from the significance of the Palaly Airport, the Jaffna skies also provided extensive exposure for different types of SLAF aircraft and for the Airmen who piloted them.

#### **Ceremonial outfits**

Until the North and East turbulent conditions kicked off in the mid-eighties, not only the SLAF but also other Armed Forces in the country remained as ceremonial outfits. It was only during the JVP insurgency in the early seventies that the Armed Forces in the Island were deployed to deal with the situation for a very brief period.

However, beginning right from the mid-eighties until the civil strife ended in May 2009, the expansion of Sri Lanka's Armed Forces was significant with men and machinery.

The SLAF will have aerobatic displays to entertain the Jaffna people as part of their 73rd-anniversary

celebration. However, it is interesting to note that Jaffna folk experienced deadly aerobatic displays when the SLAF fighter jets as well as bombers were all out to get rid of the LTTE hideouts. Therefore, when the SLAF aircraft were scaling the Northern skies to hit the enemy targets, the innocent civilians in the North, particularly in the Jaffna Peninsula, were building trenches and bunkers in their compounds to escape from the air raids. Some of the elderly people in Jaffna of that period, several of them were even Malayan pensioners, recollected their memories of hiding in trenches and bunkers when the Japanese air raids took place in the Malaysian skies during World War II.

Since the LTTE had occupied several well-built houses to house their cadres and to use those houses as their camps to store their weapons, ousting the occupants of those houses, voiceless innocent civilians who were living in the neighborhood of those makeshift LTTE hideouts either had to leave their houses and find safer places or had to make bunkers and trenches to escape from the air raids.

The SLAF has chosen the surrounding areas of the Jaffna Dutch Fort to stage its 73rd-anniversary celebration. Whereas, it was from the time the army had moved into the Jaffna fort in the mid-eighties, LTTE militants had surrounded the Fort area from all directions and continued the attack day and night to ensure that the soldiers were not stepping out of the Jaffna Fort.

The outfit placed even heavy long-range weapons to prevent the SLAF helicopters from bringing any form of supplies such as food as well as medicine along with arms and ammunition to the men trapped inside the Fort. Therefore, it was a terrible challenge for the Airmen to lower their flying machines right into the Jaffna Fort area to make available the supplies to the men trapped inside the Fort. So it was during this period Airmen faced an arduous challenge of ensuring the aerial supply route remained safe as well as keeping away from the heavy guns of the LTTE.

#### **SLAF hangars**

The SLAF's role in overcoming the deadly challenges in the Northern skies was praiseworthy. So despite the terrific challenges, the vast blue skies of Jaffna also paved the way for the modernisation of the SLAF hangars with fighter jets such as Sciamachy aircraft from Argentina, Bell series helicopters from the United States of America, MI series helicopters and Antanov planes from Russia, Kfir jets from Israel and the SLAF even went to the extent of purchasing America's huge C-130 Hercules for transportation purposes.

Several SLAF helicopters and aircraft along with a good number of die-hard pilots were shot down by the LTTE. The ruthless militant outfit even infiltrated the Air Force

Base in Katunayake and did significant damage to the SLAF by destroying some of its aircraft.

However, the SLAF played its multifaceted role not only as a fighting force but also as a guardian angel of the Armed Forces from the skies, ensuring their supplies as well as transporting the injured and airlifting even the dead bodies of the fallen men in the battlefronts.

Therefore, despite the deadly challenges and the losses faced in the Northern skies, the SLAF accommodating Jaffna as part of its 73rd-anniversary celebration under the theme of "Wings of Friendship" highlights the broader outlook of the Air Chief Air Marshal Udeni Rajapakse and his men towards strengthening the country's unity and integrity.

### **TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 9-3-2024**

#### **JCPOA resumption depends on Western action: Iran**

**TEHRAN-** During the quarterly meeting of the Council of Governors, Iran's envoy to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) highlighted that the resumption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) implementation hinges on specific actions from the United States and the European Troika.

Mohsen Naziri Asal elaborated on the Vienna negotiations, emphasizing that Iran and other JCPOA members engaged in discussions after the United States expressed willingness to return to the nuclear deal and lift unlawful sanctions. The negotiations aimed to establish conditions for the U.S. to rejoin the JCPOA and fulfill its obligations.

Naziri Asal noted the protracted nature of the negotiations, attributing the lack of progress primarily to the United States' apparent lack of political will and determination.

He expressed concern over some participants ignoring the irresponsible behavior of the U.S., suggesting that narrow political agendas supersede efforts to revive the JCPOA.

Highlighting Iran's earnest participation in the Vienna talks and its readiness to finalize the agreement, Naziri criticized the Western parties for their inconsistent stance. He emphasized the international community's expectation of tangible actions rather than mere political statements from the U.S. and the E3.

Despite Iran's readiness to comply with JCPOA obligations, Naziri Asal pointed out the ambiguity surrounding the Western parties' position, indicating their reluctance to adhere to the agreement's terms.

The negotiations, held in eight rounds in Vienna with the involvement of the 4+1 Group, the European Union, and Iran, were hindered by factors such as contradictory



behavior, decision-making delays, extravagance, and new demands from the U.S.

The envoy underscored the White House's apparent lack of resolve to return to the JCPOA, contrasting it with Iran's consistent stance in seeking a stable and reliable agreement that guarantees the lifting of sanctions without future leverage against Iran.

President Ebrahim Raisi, also affirmed Iran's willingness to continue negotiations if the West corrects its behavior towards Iran, suggesting a path forward.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement ensures that Iran's nuclear programme will be exclusively peaceful. It lays down the timeline and arrangements for the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions against Iran.

The UN Security Council endorsed the JCPOA through Resolution 2231 (2015) on 20 July 2015. On 31 July the Council of the EU adopted the legal acts transposing the first of these provisions into EU law.

On 18 October, 90 days after UN Security Council resolution 2231 (2015), the JCPOA came into effect.

The JCPOA participants made the necessary arrangements and preparations for the implementation of their JCPOA commitments.

The EU adopted legal acts providing for the lifting of all nuclear-related economic and financial EU sanctions as specified in the JCPOA, taking effect as of implementation day, simultaneously with the IAEA-verified implementation by Iran of agreed nuclear-related measures.

### **TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 5-3-2024**

#### **Iran, Qatar hold defense talks at DIMDEX expo in Doha**

**TEHRAN** - Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani is visiting Doha, the capital of Qatar, to hold talks with top Qatari defense and military officials and visit the Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition and Conference (DIMDEX).

Upon his arrival in Doha, General Ashtiani engaged in significant discussions with Khalid bin Mohammad Al Attiyah, the Minister of Defense of Qatar. The talks focused on enhancing diplomatic and military cooperation between the two nations.

In the Qatari capital, the Iranian Minister of Defense and his counterpart delved into a comprehensive exploration of mutual interests, emphasizing the need for collaborative efforts to address regional security challenges. The discussions also encompassed strategic planning for joint military exercises and shared defense initiatives.

The meeting featured in-depth conversations covering various topics of interest to both nations. These ranged from regional security concerns to the exchange of perspectives on potential avenues for improvement and development in bilateral relations.

The Maritime Defence Capabilities Exhibition (DIMDEX) provided a platform for showcasing cutting-edge technologies and military capabilities. Ashtiani's active participation in the exhibition underscored Iran's commitment to regional stability and its willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue with neighboring nations.

As the discussions continue, the outcomes of these bilateral talks are anticipated to contribute to strengthened diplomatic ties and collaborative efforts in the realm of defense and security between Iran and Qatar.

During the exhibition, Iran's defense equipment and achievements are taking the spotlight at the Ministry of Defense booth, as reported by Iranian media.

Among the featured accomplishments are Iran's short-range air defense missile system '9-Dey,' a variety of anti-ship cruise missiles, the man-portable surface-to-air missile system 'Misaq,' the 'Khordad' air defense system, and a radar system for human detection.

Furthermore, the exhibition includes a display of individual armaments, showcasing indigenous combat weapons and cartridges with calibers of 20 and 12.7 millimeters.

The Iranian Ministry of Defense has specifically highlighted key equipment at the exhibition, including Shahed 129 and Shahed 149 drones, referred to as 'Gaza,' and mapping radar systems named S-811 and S-813, alongside the F-365 bomb.

Iran has developed an ascendant military industry in the past decades. The country owns different types of precision-guided missiles, drones, and defense systems, all domestically produced.

Iranian military experts and engineers have made remarkable breakthroughs in manufacturing a broad range of indigenous equipment in recent years, contributing to the armed forces' self-sufficiency.

### **TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 9-3-2024**

#### **Assessing Iran's Military Capabilities**

**By Xavier Villar**

**TEHRAN** - The purpose of this article is to examine Iran's defensive capabilities at a time when the region is immersed in ongoing tension that could escalate into a large-scale military conflict.

First and foremost, it is important to highlight that the Islamic Republic has consistently expressed its

willingness to resolve potential conflicts through intra-regional diplomacy, acknowledging that it is the countries within the region that bear the responsibility of discussing the foundations of political coexistence. However, it is evident that, despite this "diplomatic willingness," the region presents a series of unique political characteristics that cannot be solely addressed through inter-regional diplomacy.

For example, Israel, or the Zionist entity, according to the grammar of the Islamic Republic, is not perceived as simply another country in the Middle Eastern landscape, but rather as the clearest embodiment of Western ideology and its political dangers. Israel's presence in the region poses a series of security challenges that cannot be addressed exclusively through diplomacy. In addition to the Zionist colonial entity, it is also important to mention the presence of the United States, as well as regional competition with Turkey, as security elements to be considered.

The situation in Iran presents a series of unique circumstances that impact its military capabilities. Specifically, the country's economy is under significant pressure and experiencing a prolonged recession due to years of severe sanctions. As a result, Iran does not have the freedom to increase its defense and military expenditures discretionarily.

In this sense, it is important to highlight that sanctions have a long history within the Western system. They are not merely an alternative or complement to war, but rather a form of warfare by other means. These sanctions are primarily directed from the core towards the semi-periphery and periphery, aiming to cause significant harm to the internal productive forces of nation-states and create dependent populations.

However, despite the sanctions, Iran has managed to significantly develop its military capabilities, which, along with its regional diplomacy, has allowed it to consolidate itself as a power in the region. From a military perspective, Iran bases its defense on a responsiveness that matches the level of threat it faces. This responsiveness is framed within an asymmetric vision of defense, which involves establishing relationships, based on discursive similarities, with both state and non-state actors in the region. Iran has sought to maximize the use of this asymmetric approach, both to deter any threat and to defend its interests in the region.

This relationship, as mentioned, is based on discursive similarities, rejecting the centrality of a discourse that presents the relationship between Iran and its regional allies in terms of domination by the former. The political relationship between the Islamic Republic and the other members of the Resistance Axis cannot be understood in hierarchical terms, but rather in political-discursive affinities that imply a distribution of power horizontally.

Considering all of the above, it can be said that one of Iran's strengths from a defensive standpoint is its size. As one of the most populous countries in the region, Iran boasts armed forces exceeding a million members. In addition to this number, the members of the rest of the Resistance Axis have made it clear that they will collaborate in its defense in the event of conflict. Overall, the Iranian army ranks on par with the other two most important armies in the region, such as those of Turkey and Egypt.

Due to the sanctions imposed over the years, the Islamic Republic has invested considerable effort in developing an autonomous defense industry in recent decades. This has allowed Iran to keep its army up to date compared to its closest competitors. Specifically, Iran has made notable progress in the development of missile and drone systems, a constant priority for Iranian military leaders that became a defensive necessity during the war with Iraq in the 1980s. Currently, Iran is recognized as one of the top five countries in the world in drone production.

Another strong point in Iran's defensive capabilities is its geography. Several Iranian experts have highlighted the physical characteristics of the country that present significant obstacles to a potential invasion. Firstly, Iran's considerable size, almost four times that of Iraq, provides it with a notable strategic depth. Most of Iran's borders are safeguarded by extensive mountain ranges, especially the Zagros Mountains in the west. Additionally, most of Iran's major population centers are located in mountainous areas, providing them with natural protection. The access to a vital maritime route, the Persian Gulf, and Iran's absolute control over the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic passage between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman crucial for hydrocarbon transportation, should not be underestimated. This complete dominance of the Strait gives Iran the ability to block the passage of ships in case of extreme necessity, which would have significant repercussions on the global economy.

Regarding the challenges in defense, it has been pointed out that sanctions represent the main adversity facing the country. These sanctions have led to deficiencies in Iran's conventional weapon arsenals and have prevented it from having an adequate military budget to overcome this limitation. It is important to highlight that, due to the sanctions, the country has faced needs in areas such as anti-aircraft defenses and military transportation, as it relies on a fleet of outdated aircraft.

Despite these challenges, Iran has managed to develop its military industry, and according to its own estimates, it has the capability to inflict significant damage in response to any threat. The country has creatively addressed the difficulties imposed by external pressure. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the construction

of underground military facilities that are protected against potential enemy air attacks.

It can be asserted, therefore, that the Islamic Republic will continue to organize its defense around an asymmetric vision. The deterrent potential of this approach has created a situation where Iran's adversaries understand that any direct attack against the country would result in a response of equal intensity.

Finally, it is important to remember that the defensive vision of the Islamic Republic is framed within a political perspective that divides the region in terms of friends and enemies, based on the Islamic distinction between political actors who tirelessly seek justice and truth, and those who are based on injustice and oppression.

### **TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 13-3-2024**

#### **Iran, China, Russia begin naval drill in northern Indian Ocean**

**TEHRAN** – The navies of Iran, China, and Russia have initiated joint drills in the northern tip of the Indian Ocean, marking their fifth collaborative military exercise in recent years.

Simultaneously, Chinese and Russian naval forces have entered Iranian territorial waters to participate in the primary stage of the naval war game, named Maritime Security Belt 2024, near the Gulf of Oman. This international exercise, involving Iran, China, and Russia, underscores a commitment to peace and security in the region.

During a joint press conference with Russian and Chinese commanders, Second Flotilla Admiral Mustafa Taj al-Dini emphasized the strategic significance of this being the fifth joint exercise among the involved countries. He highlighted the objectives of this joint naval drill, including "bolstering maritime trade security," "combating piracy and terrorism," and "fostering cooperation among the participating nations."

According to Taj al-Dini, this security-focused exercise, covering an expansive area of 17,000 square kilometers, aims to address multifaceted challenges. Despite the approaching festivities for the Persian New Year, the spokesperson underscored that security efforts remain steadfast. Notably, naval units from Iran, China, and Russia, comprising destroyers and missile cruisers, actively contribute to this collaborative initiative.

Naval delegations from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Oman, Pakistan, and South Africa are present as the observers of the exercises.

Iranian naval forces, along with their Chinese and Russian counterparts, have conducted several military drills in recent years to enhance the security and

stability of international maritime trade. They have also collaborated in countering piracy and maritime terrorism, exchanging information in naval rescue and relief operations, as well as sharing operational and tactical experiences.

Russia's defense ministry stated that the exercises, running through Friday and involving warships and aviation, would focus on the protection of "maritime economic activity." The Russian defence ministry said its Pacific fleet, led by the Varyag guided missile cruiser and the Marshal Shaposhnikov frigate, had arrived at Iran's Chabahar port on Monday to take part in the joint drill.

China's defense ministry mentioned that the drills aimed at "jointly maintaining regional maritime security." China sent its 45th escort task force, consisting of the guided-missile destroyer Urumqi, guided-missile frigate Linyi, and the comprehensive supply ship Dongpinghu, to the exercise.

Last month, Rear Admiral Shahram Irani, commander of the Iranian Navy, announced Tehran's plan to hold joint drills with Beijing and Moscow before the end of March, aimed at ensuring regional security.

Providing insights into the strategic maritime efforts, the rear admiral revealed that the mission to safeguard Iran's shipping lines in international waters commenced in 2009 under the direct command of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei.

Emphasizing the unwavering commitment of the Army's strategic naval force, he highlighted their continuous role in ensuring the security of the nation's economic hub in both the Gulf of Aden and the northern Indian Ocean.

The admiral further highlighted the expansion of the security mission beyond securing shipping lines in the Red Sea over the past four years. Currently, the comprehensive management of protection for Iran's shipping lines extends from the Gulf of Aden to the Suez Canal.

The Iranian Navy conducts routine exercises throughout the year. In recent years, Iranian military experts and technicians have made significant progress in developing and manufacturing a diverse range of military equipment, achieving self-sufficiency for the armed forces in the military industry.

In March 2023, Iranian, Chinese, and Russian naval forces staged the 2023 Marine Security Belt war game in the northern parts of the Indian Ocean, marking the fourth joint exercise in recent years. Alongside Chinese and Russian fleets, more than 10 Iranian Navy vessels and three helicopters reportedly took part.

**DAWN, ISLAMABAD 3-3-2024****Seizure of commercial consignment  
draws FO ire****Baqir Sajjad Syed**

**ISLAMABAD:** The Foreign Office on Saturday issued a sharp rebuke in response to India's interception and seizure of a commercial consignment en route to Pakistan, labelling the action as an "unjustified seizure" and criticising India's self-assumed role as a regional enforcer.

"Pakistan condemns India's high-handedness in seizure of commercial goods. This disruption of free trade underscores the dangers inherent in the arbitrary assumption of policing roles by states with dubious credentials," Foreign Office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch said.

Her comments came after media reports about the interception by India on Jan 23 of a Malta-flagged merchant vessel, CMA CGM Attila, near Mumbai's Nhava Sheva port. The Karachi-bound ship from China was boarded, and its cargo was inspected based on what Indians claimed to be specific intelligence inputs.

Indian customs officials, according to statements made to Indian media, found an Italian-made computer numerical control (CNC) machine within the consignment, alleging its potential utility in nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, and subsequently confiscated it.

Ms Baloch clarified that the item in question was "a commercial lathe machine". The intended recipient of the seized machinery has been identified as Cosmos Engineering, a Karachi-based firm that manufactures automobile parts and home appliances.

The consignment was seized after the port officials had alerted the Indian defence authorities, who inspected the heavy cargo and reported their suspicions. Officials in India were quoted as saying that the seizure fell under the "prevention of possible proliferation by Pakistan and China".

According to Indian media reports, documents such as the bill of lading and other consignment details purportedly showed that the consigner was Shanghai JXE Global Logistics Co Ltd and weighed 22,180 kilograms.

"This is a simple case of import of a commercial lathe machine by a Karachi-based commercial entity, which supplies parts to the automobile industry in Pakistan," Ms Baloch elaborated. "Specifications of the equipment clearly indicate its purely commercial use. The transaction was being conducted through transparent banking channels with all the relevant documentation."

Criticising the Indian action, she remarked, "Such acts also highlight the growing impunity of certain states in

violating international norms and taking arbitrary measures in violation of international law."

*Our correspondent in New Delhi also contributed to this report*

**THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 15-3-2024****US Navy ship arrives for exercise with  
Pak Navy****APP**

**KARACHI:** US Navy Ship USS INDIANAPOLIS, Freedom Class Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) on Thursday visited the Karachi Port and conducted a sea drill with the Pakistan Navy.

According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), upon arrival in Karachi, the US Navy ship was received by senior officials of the Pakistan Navy. During the US ship's stay in Karachi, the activities included professional interaction with the PN officials and the ship's crew in the form of table top discussions on contemporary issues besides planning and coordination meeting for conduct of joint sea exercise.

At sea, the Pakistan Navy Ship ALAMGIR with embarked helicopter carried out sea exercise with visiting US Navy ship to enhance interoperability between both the navies.

The sea exercise was aimed to strengthen mutual professional skills through cooperation and learning from each other's experience.

The Pakistan Navy, in line with the government policy, has always contributed significantly towards safety, security and freedom of navigation at high seas.

In this regard, the Pakistan Navy's regional maritime security patrol and participation in the Coalition Maritime Forces operations since 2004 has been a manifestation of PN's resolve for safe and secure seas for common cause of peace and stability in the region.

**THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 7-3-2024****COAS unveils HAIDER tank at HIT****Staff Reporter**

**ISLAMABAD -** Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Syed Asim Munir NI (M) visited Heavy Industries Taxila (HIT) on Wednesday as chief guest at the rollout ceremony of HAIDER tank (Pilot Project).

The ceremony was attended by Ambassador of the Peoples Republic of China, key officials of Chinese state company NORINCO, high officials of Government of Pakistan & Pakistan Army, and various military and civilian officials of HIT.

According to a press release issued by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), during the ceremony, HIT unveiled its new Tank HAIDER, which has been indigenously manufactured through collaboration with NORINCO China and various industries of Pakistan. HAIDER embodies cutting-edge technology and impressive capability in the domain of tank warfare having remarkable firepower, protection and manoeuvre characteristics, the ISPR said. Crafted with state-of-the-art advanced technologies, HAIDER stands as a testament to Pakistani defence industry's relentless pursuit of excellence in defence innovation.

COAS was briefed in detail about the technical capabilities of the HAIDER tank and the progress being made in achieving indigenization in arms and armament. COAS also visited other manufacturing facilities within the Heavy Industrial Complex and appreciated the commitment of the officers and workforce in successful achievement of another technological milestone. Earlier on arrival, COAS was received by Chairman HIT.

Meanwhile, Army Chief General Syed Asim Munir called on Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in Islamabad on Wednesday. He felicitated Shehbaz Sharif and extended good wishes for him on assuming office of the Prime Minister. During the meeting, views were also exchanged on professional matters of the Pakistan Army and security affairs.

### **GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 7-3-2024**

#### **Japan in no position to point fingers at China's military expenditure**

Every year during the two sessions, two key figures attract significant external attention: the GDP growth target and the national defense budget. China's national defense budget this year is approximately 1.67 trillion yuan (\$234.5 billion), with a growth rate of 7.2 percent, maintaining the same pace as the previous year. This marks the ninth consecutive year of single-digit growth in China's defense budget. As soon as this data is released each year, there is a round of hype about the "China military threat theory." This year, Japan took the lead in fueling this speculation.

On the day the data was released, Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi promptly expressed "serious concerns" during a press conference. He claimed that "China has continuously boosted its national defense expenditures to strengthen its military power without sufficient transparency," calling it "the biggest, unprecedented strategic challenge." He also emphasized the need to respond with "Japan's full power and with the help of allies and like-minded nations." Japan's swift response aligns with its recent

behavioral patterns in recent years and is not surprising. However, it is in no position to make such statements.

Look at Japan's defense budget for the fiscal year 2024, which has increased by 16.5 percent compared to the previous fiscal year, reaching a historic high. This is more than twice the growth rate of China's defense budget. This is still the case despite Japan being constrained by the peace constitution. The Asahi Shimbun, a Japanese newspaper, commented that such a large-scale budget has completely exceeded its own needs and is in an inflated state. After Japan passed the new "three security documents" at the end of 2022, its eagerness and actions to expand its military capabilities are aptly described as rapidly and extensively enhancing its military capabilities "without sufficient transparency." Especially considering Japan's historical aggression against neighboring Asian countries during its militaristic past, its current urgency to break through the peace constitution poses a risk to the security environment in the Asia-Pacific region.

China has always adhered to a defensive national defense policy, insisting on never seeking hegemony, expansion, or spheres of influence. However, China has national interests that need to be defended, especially the core interests of maintaining sovereignty and territorial integrity. China is the only one among the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council that has not yet achieved reunification. "Taiwan independence" and external interference forces have been seeking opportunities to cause trouble, requiring China to strengthen its national defense capabilities. The world is not peaceful, and the stronger the People's Liberation Army as a force for peace is, the more effectively it can safeguard regional and global peace and stability. Japan uses the international community as a cover, but it can only represent itself. The international community does not harbor ill intentions toward China and does not perceive a "threat" from China's defense construction, only will feel security.

Is a 7.2 percent increase significant? Answering this question requires a comparison both horizontally and vertically. The proportion of military spending in China's GDP has been maintained at less than 1.5 percent for many years, while in the US, this proportion is over 3 percent. In terms of per capita military spending, the US is more than 15 times that of China. The US has forcibly required other NATO countries to increase military spending to over 2 percent of their respective GDPs. Although Japan is not a NATO country, it voluntarily aligns with this standard. The increase in Japan's defense budget this year is not accidental, and it is expected to remain at a similar level for at least the next three years.

As the spokesperson for the second session of the 14th National People's Congress pointed out on Tuesday, compared with military powers such as the US, China's

defense spending, whether as a percentage of GDP, as a percentage of national fiscal expenditure, or in terms of per capita national defense expenditure and per capita military expenditure, has always been relatively low.

There is also a problem of reverse causation here. To a certain extent, it is precisely the security pressure imposed on China by Western countries, including Japan, in various ways, that has made China unable to relax, leaving it no choice but to strengthen its national defense construction. This, in turn, is used by Western countries to hype up the "China military threat theory." China is a great country in human history that has achieved super-scale development in a completely peaceful manner like never before. China's image as a peaceful and restrained major country is deeply rooted in the world. Only those with ulterior motives, who want to suppress China's normal military development and disrupt China's military modernization development in the name of deterrence, will make an issue of and point an accusing finger at China's reasonable increase in military spending.

#### **GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 11-3-2024**

### **Chinese military aims to boost strategic capabilities in emerging areas such as AI, unmanned tech**

**By Liu Xuanzun**

The Chinese military has vowed to implement President Xi Jinping's call to enhance strategic capabilities in emerging areas, with military lawmakers and experts stressing the importance of new quality productive forces including artificial intelligence (AI), unmanned technologies, aerospace and cyberspace in modern warfare.

Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, on Thursday called on China's armed forces to forge a stronger sense of mission, deepen reform and promote innovation to comprehensively enhance strategic capabilities in emerging areas. He made the remarks while attending a plenary meeting of the delegation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the People's Armed Police Force (PAP) at the second session of the 14th National People's Congress, or China's national legislature, the Xinhua News Agency reported on the day.

Xi said China's drive to accelerate the development of new quality productive forces has provided rare opportunities for the development of strategic capabilities in emerging areas.

He called for enabling new quality productive forces and new quality combat capabilities to effectively integrate with and boost each other.

Xi urged efforts to coordinate maritime military preparedness, maritime rights and interests protection, and marine economy development.

He called for optimizing the aerospace layout to promote China's aerospace system development, and for building a cyberspace defense system to enhance the ability to safeguard national cybersecurity.

Six lawmakers from the Chinese military spoke at the meeting on topics ranging from defense capabilities in cyberspace and the application of AI to the development and utilization of unmanned combat capabilities.

After the meeting, lawmakers and political advisors from the PLA and the PAP said that technology must be firmly endorsed as the core combat capability to comprehensively enhance strategic capabilities in emerging areas, so the Chinese military should push forward technology innovations and applications and promote the effective supply of technologies toward new quality combat capabilities, the PLA Daily reported on Sunday.

Strategic capabilities in emerging areas are a focal point in major power competition, a vantage point in high-end warfare, and an acting point in enhancing new quality combat capabilities, Han Shengyan, a military lawmaker, was quoted as saying by the PLA Daily.

Citing military lawmaker Hao Jingwen, the PLA Daily report said that drone swarm technologies in air, sea and land have been developed and successively deployed in regional conflicts, so China needs to realize the important roles emerging areas and new quality combat capabilities could play in modern warfare, be aware of their development trends, plan battlefield applications of advanced technologies in advance, and conduct active research in fields such as big data, the Internet of Things and AI, so as to be able to win future warfare.

Lü Yuncheng, another military lawmaker, said that intelligentized unmanned combat systems have been widely deployed in actual combat in recent regional wars and military operations around the globe, as new-type combat forces have become key variables in changing rules of warfare, so China should optimize the structure and configuration of its military, accelerate the development of intelligentized unmanned combat forces, and promote new-type combat forces' integration into combat systems as main forces and have them play leading roles, the PLA Daily reported.

Another PLA Daily report on Saturday noted that with unmanned and intelligentized technologies changing the rules of combat, integrated joint operations have become the main form of warfare, and wars will be fought in multidimensions, and that is why China must focus on emerging areas.

Several military experts told the Global Times that strategic capabilities refer to capabilities that can greatly shape the form or outcome of geopolitics in peacetime,

or those of a conflict in wartime, and with the advances in technologies, AI, unmanned equipment and related developments, they are expected to play greater strategic roles than the current tactical roles.

Such capabilities are vital in deterring and stopping conflicts amid the current instabilities in the regional and global security environment, and will contribute to peace and stability, said the experts, who imagined a scenario in which swarms of unmanned equipment launch an unstoppable attack that is both saturated and precise at the same time under the unified command of a strategic AI after gaining situational awareness through various means, including sensors in land, air, sea, space, electromagnetic space and cyberspace.

Enhancing strategic capabilities in emerging areas is not only the task of the military, but also of scientists, the defense industry as well as politicians, analysts said.

At the meeting, Xi said it is necessary to deepen structural reform of defense-related science and technology industries by accelerating the supply of new quality combat capabilities.

Military lawmaker Liu Zheng said that science and technology will not automatically become combat capability, and that China will need to find the pathways to convert advanced technologies into new quality combat capabilities, and mechanisms to solve problems in the process, the PLA Daily reported.

#### **GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 15-3-2024**

### **China, Iran, Russia wrap up sea phase of joint naval exercise**

*Rescue training of commercial ships reflects peaceful nature of trilateral cooperation*

**By Liu Xuanzun and Guo Yuandan**

The five-day China-Iran-Russia joint naval exercise Security Belt-2024 on Wednesday wrapped up its sea phase. The core part of the drill saw warships from the three countries conducting training to rescue civilian ships, which reflected the peaceful nature of the trilateral cooperation, experts said on Thursday.

Held near the Gulf of Oman from Tuesday to Wednesday, the sea phase of the joint exercise featured training courses including live-fire shooting at maritime targets and armed rescue on hijacked commercial ships, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy said in a press release on Thursday.

On Tuesday, the three countries' warships took turns and fired at mock targets at sea during both day and night, and practiced light signal communications, the PLA Navy said, attaching a photo showing a Chinese special force member firing a machine gun on board of a warship.

On Wednesday, the three countries mixed their vessels into two task forces and conducted a rescue operation for two Iranian ships playing the roles of commercial ships.

Under the command of the PLA Navy destroyer *Urumqi*, the task force one consisted of six warships from the Chinese and Iranian sides quickly maneuvered to advantageous positions, conducted reconnaissance on a mock commercial ship hijacked by pirates, and sent small boats to approach the vessel.

Special force members then boarded the ship, neutralized the mock hostile forces, controlled the vessel and rescued the mock hostages.

The exercise also practiced extinguishing fire broke out on the mock commercial ships, another photo released by the PLA Navy shows.

With the participating warships' return to the Chabahar Port in Iran on Wednesday local time, the sea phase of the Security Belt-2024 joint exercise successfully completed, the PLA Navy said.

The joint exercise, kicked off on Monday and will run until Friday, is organized in three phases, namely the harbor phase, the sea phase and the summarize phase, China Central Television (CCTV) reported on Tuesday after the launch of the drills.

The sea phase is usually the core part of a naval exercise that features actual force deployment, while the harbor phase and the summarize phase often include organizing and tactical discussions as well as exchanges that boost participants' mutual understanding and friendship, a Chinese military expert who observed several other joint naval drills told the Global Times on Thursday, requesting anonymity.

Highlighted by the rescue of hijacked commercial ships near the Gulf of Oman, an important international sea lane featuring the transport of key energy and goods, the exercise showed that the trilateral military cooperation focuses on the safeguard of the maritime security in the region in terms of non-traditional security threats, rather than dealing with traditional security threats or stressing bloc confrontation or geopolitics, the expert said.

Zhang Junshe, another Chinese military expert, told the Global Times that the China-Iran-Russia joint exercises, which have been held for four editions since 2019, all focused on non-traditional security threats, and they did not target any third country, nor were they related to regional situations.

The exercise area near the Gulf of Oman, located in the northern part of the Arabian Sea, is connected with the Persian Gulf with the Strait of Hormuz, giving it strategic significance in terms of international shipping, experts said, noting that the trilateral exercise is conducive to the safeguard of the international sea lane as well as maritime security in the region.