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F-5/2, Ataturk Avenue, Islamabad, Pakistan

E-mails: irspak@comsats.net.pk, irspak@yahoo.com URL: <http://www.irs.org.pk>

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THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 10-11-2023

‘Violation of bilateral agreements’: MEA on unprovoked firing along Pak border

HT Correspondent

A BSF personnel died in unprovoked firing by Pakistan Rangers along the international border in Ramgarh sector of Sambha district on Thursday

NEW DELHI: The recent ceasefire violations on the Line of Control (LoC) and incidents of firing on the international border by Pakistan and instances of cross-border infiltration are violations of bilateral agreements, the external affairs ministry said on Thursday.

A BSF personnel died after being injured in unprovoked firing by the Pakistan Rangers along the international border in Ramgarh sector of Sambha district of Jammu and Kashmir on Thursday. This was the third ceasefire violation in 24 days by the Pakistan Rangers on the international border, and the sixth overall violation since the two sides revived a ceasefire agreement in February 2021.

“Such incidents of ceasefire violations and cross-border infiltration, sometimes done with drones and with firing, are violations of bilateral agreements and we always raise and take up these matters with Pakistan,” external affairs ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi told a weekly media briefing.

“The BSF has raised the recent incidents that have occurred with the Pakistani side during flag meetings. We have also put this issue before them through diplomatic channels,” he said.

In response to a question, Bagchi said the Indian side attaches importance to the Kartarpur Corridor, which allows Indian nationals to visit a historic gurdwara in Pakistan without visas, and has often asked Pakistan to withdraw a fee of \$20 imposed on all visitors.

“We have proposed that this fee should be removed and we have also reiterated this but there has been no update from the Pakistani side. We are aware of the difficulties caused by the fee and we will continue raising it,” he said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 11-11-2023

BSF DG Agarwal reviews preparedness along LoC

Staff Correspondent

Srinagar, The Director General of the Border Security Force (BSF), Nitin Agarwal, conducted a visit to the forward areas along the Line of Control (LoC) in the North Kashmir Gulmarg sector to assess operational preparedness, according to officials.

During the visit, Agarwal interacted with the troops, commending them for their high morale, commitment,

and professionalism, as reported by the BSF, Kashmir, on X. “Nitin Agarwal, DG @BSF_India visited the forward areas of sector #Srinagar along the #LoC to review the operational preparedness of the units. DG interacted with troops & applauded them for their high morale, commitment & professionalism,” stated the BSF, Kashmir, on X.

Agarwal is on a four-day visit to Kashmir. On November 8, he visited the LoC in North Kashmir’s Bandipora, where he assessed the operational preparedness. Additionally, he visited the Army Srinagar-based Chinari Corps, interacting with Lt General Rajiv Ghai, and reviewed the security situation in Kashmir on Wednesday.

Furthermore, Agarwal attended the passing-out parade of newly recruited BSF personnel at Humhama in central Kashmir’s Budgam district on Thursday.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 12-11-2023

India, China ground commanders hold talks as troops brace for Ladakh winter

Amrita Nayak Dutta

Bracing for what will be their fourth winter since the start of the military standoff along the Line of Actual Control in eastern Ladakh, Indian and Chinese ground commanders have been holding interactions to rule out any incident as troop deployments are readjusted for the harsh months ahead.

Sources have told The Sunday Express that several agenda-based interactions have been taking place at multiple points along the LAC for nearly 10 days now between local commanders at the levels of brigade and below to sort out minor issues that may have cropped up and to prevent any incident during the winter months.

More such meetings are likely to take place over the next few weeks.

This is among the various confidence-building measures (CBMs) which were discussed during the Corps Commander-level talks between the two sides.

Other CBMs discussed in the last few rounds of military talks were adherence to existing border protocols and advance sharing of patrol information to avoid clashes on ground.

Sources said the Indian Army, in the last fortnight, has already started moving into its winter posture. They say another round of high-level military talks is expected to take place before the start of summer.

“Even as these CBMs are being implemented along the LAC, the Army has continued to maintain adequate reserves in the depth areas as part of preparations to deal with any contingency that may crop up,” a source said.

Additionally, enhancement of infrastructure, wherever feasible, is being carried out despite the extreme cold weather conditions in eastern Ladakh, the source said.

The Indian Express reported last month that the Army's winter posture will see overall redeployment of troops along the LAC – possibly also a reduction in troop strength from eastern Ladakh while maintaining adequate reserves in depth areas.

Additionally, a range of latest surveillance devices were to be deployed for domination of the border and there were plans to carry out adequate winter air surveillance operations by helicopters and limited patrolling by troops as and when required.

In the 20th round of military talks held last month, there was no tangible forward movement on the ground, but both sides had agreed to maintain the momentum of dialogue and negotiations through various military and diplomatic mechanisms, while committing to maintain peace and tranquillity on the ground in the interim, according to a statement issued by the government.

India has been pressing for access to all its old patrolling points along the LAC and early disengagement at the remaining friction points including legacy ones such as Depsang Plains and Demchok. An overall de-escalation of troops in the Ladakh region has also been on the agenda of the talks.

In September 2022, both sides pulled back troops to disengage from Patrolling Point-15 in the Gogra-Hot Springs area of eastern Ladakh, marking a major step in the **standoff which began in May 2020**.

Friction points such as Galwan Valley, north and south banks of Pangong Tso and the Gogra-Hot Springs area have seen some resolution in the last three years with the creation of buffer zones.

However, legacy friction points such as Depsang Plains and Demchok are yet to see any disengagement.

Both sides had pushed in nearly 50,000-60,000 troops along the LAC within months of the start of the standoff.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 13-11-2023

Eastern Ladakh: Despite 20 rounds of military talks, Chinese army remains unmoved

Military veterans have cited the long stalemate, and the recent post-talk statements' silence on a return to status quo ante, to suggest that India is capitulating to a Chinese plan to establish a new status quo along the Line of Actual Control

Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, New Delhi

The Chinese army remains entrenched well within India-claimed lines at several points in eastern Ladakh after 20 rounds of military talks, spread over 266 hours or more than 11 days, since the border standoff began in May 2020.

Military veterans have cited the long stalemate, and the recent post-talk statements' silence on a return to status

quo ante, to suggest that India is capitulating to a Chinese plan to establish a new status quo along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

"It's been over three years since the Chinese transgressions and the Indian government is still sticking to the 'no-intrusion' claims made by Modi," a retired lieutenant general said exasperatedly as he spoke to **The Telegraph**.

"At the same time, the Indian army has held 20 rounds of talks with its Chinese counterpart to try and resolve the border standoff. Who are they fooling?"

The corps commander-level military talks began on June 6, 2020, nine days before a clash in the Galwan Valley killed 20 Indian soldiers and at least four Chinese troops.

Four days after the June 15 clash, Modi came out with his "no-intrusion" statement, allowing Beijing to deny any border transgressions and claim ownership of all the territory it held in the region.

What the talks have achieved since then are "partial" disengagements from the Galwan Valley, Pangong Lake, Hot Springs and Gogra through the creation of "buffer zones", with the Chinese and Indian armies stepping back by an agreed and equal distance each.

This has left the Chinese still within India-claimed lines while the Indians have retreated within their own territory, fuelling the "ceding more territory" allegations.

The strategically crucial Depsang Plains remain the only friction point where no disengagement has taken place.

This is a 972sqkm plateau situated 16,000ft above sea level that lies to the west of Aksai Chin, which is under illegal occupation by China, and has the Siachen Glacier on its northwest edge. Here, the Chinese are said to be entrenched 18km inside India-claimed lines.

Overall, the Chinese army is estimated to have taken over close to 2,000sqkm of India-claimed territory in Ladakh.

A research paper submitted by an IPS officer during the DGPs' conference in Delhi in January this year said India had lost access to 26 of its 65 patrolling points in eastern Ladakh following the Chinese incursions.

"So far, what we have witnessed is capitulation by the Indian government (which has apparently accepted) China's terms," the retired lieutenant general said.

Over 60,000 soldiers with heavy armaments continue to be deployed on both sides, close to the LAC. Over the past three years, the Chinese army is said to have undertaken a massive construction of infrastructure, including roads and bridges and permanent camps for its troops, close to the LAC, altering the status quo on the ground.

Both sides disengaged from the Pangong Lake in February 2021, from Patrolling Point 17 in the Gogra area in August 2021 and from Patrolling Point 15

(Gogra-Hotsprings) in September 2022. This is in addition to the disengagement from the Galwan Valley in 2020.

The "buffer zones" are 3km wide in the Galwan Valley, 8-10km at the Pangong Lake, 3km at Gogra and 4km at Hot Springs, sources in the security establishment said.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 11-11-2023

Defence cooperation one of the most important pillars of India-US relationship: Antony Blinken at '2+2' meet

The US delegation at the 2+2 ministerial talks was led by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin; External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh headed the Indian side

PTI, New Delhi

India and the US on Friday held extensive deliberations to further expand their global strategic partnership through greater defence industrial ties, enhancing engagement in the Indo-Pacific and boosting cooperation in key areas such as critical minerals and high-technology.

The US delegation at the 2+2 ministerial talks was led by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh headed the Indian side.

"Our dialogue today will be an opportunity to advance the vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Joe Biden to build a forward looking partnership and construct a shared global agenda," Jaishankar said in his televised opening remarks.

"We are exploring cooperation in new domains such as critical technologies, collaboration in civil outer space and in areas of critical minerals," he said.

In his remarks, Blinken said both sides are promoting a free and open, prosperous, secure and resilient Indo-Pacific including by strengthening the US-India partnership through the Quad.

He said the focus is to bolster the partnership in international peace, security and specifically working to promote rules-based order, uphold principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence.

In his opening comments, Singh said the India-US bilateral relationship has seen a growing interest in strategic convergence and enhanced defence cooperation.

"Defence cooperation remains one of the most important pillars of our bilateral relationship," he said.

"We look forward to closely working with the US across domains of capability building," Singh said.

US Defence Secretary Austin, in his opening remarks, said in the face of urgent global challenges, it is more important than ever that the world's two largest democracies exchange views, find common goals and "deliver for our people".

"Our increasingly strong ties give us all hope for the future of this partnership and our common efforts towards a more secure world," he said

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 11-11-2023

US Secretary of State Blinken, Defence Secretary Austin meet PM Modi

Our shared belief in democracy, pluralism and the rule of law underpins our mutually beneficial cooperation in diverse sectors. The India-US partnership is truly a force for global good, says the prime minister

PTI, New Delhi

The India-US partnership is truly a force for global good, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said a

fter US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin jointly called on him Friday after conclusion of the '2+2' ministerial dialogue.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar were also present at the meeting between Modi and the two visiting American officials.

"Glad to receive @SecBlinken and @SecDef. The '2+2' Format is a key enabler for further strengthening the India-US Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership," Modi said on X.

"Our shared belief in democracy, pluralism and the rule of law underpins our mutually beneficial cooperation in diverse sectors. The India-US partnership is truly a force for global good," he said.

At the '2+2' dialogue, Singh, Jaishankar, Austin and Blinken held extensive deliberations to take forward the India-US global strategic partnership.

In his opening remarks at the dialogue, Jaishankar referred to Modi's visit to the US in June and US President Joe Biden's subsequent trip to India in September to attend the G20 summit.

"The highlight of this year was the prime minister's state visit to the US in June which has truly opened a new chapter in our relationship. President Biden's visit to Delhi in September contributed immensely to the positive trajectory of our ties," he said.

A joint statement issued at the end of the '2+2' dialogue said India and the US reaffirmed their resolve to promote a resilient, rules-based international order with respect for international law, including the UN Charter, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to ensure peace and prosperity for all.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-11-2023

India, US affirm commitment on Indo-Pacific to tackle China

2+2 PM lists initiatives both sides need to take on defence co-op

Ajay Banerjee

New Delhi, India and the US, engaged over a 2+2 meeting in New Delhi yesterday, gave assurances on working together to “tackle” China and ensuring cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. After the meeting, Prime Minister Narendra Modi set out the initiatives that the two sides need to pursue on defence cooperation and the Indo-Pacific.

At the meeting, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar met their US counterparts Lloyd Austin and Antony Blinken, respectively.

India was keen to assess how committed the US was about the Indo-Pacific after its involvement in helping Ukraine fight Russia and in brokering peace between Israel and Hamas.

Defence Minister Rajnath set the ball rolling at the one-on-one meeting with his American counterpart saying “we (India-US) increasingly find ourselves in agreement on strategic issues, including countering China’s aggression”.

“We share a focus on maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region, criticality of safeguarding vital sea lanes and our teams are working on substantive outcomes,” Rajnath Singh said and mentioned that “new domains” were expanding the scope of collaboration.

Lloyd responded saying “(we are) committed to collaborating closely with India in support of our shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific”.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken took up the matter with Modi when he and Lloyd met him. The US State Department put out a small note on the meeting quoting Blinken saying “reaffirmed the United States’ and India’s shared vision for close partnership in the Indo-Pacific and on issues of global importance”. The US Department of Defense also put out a note saying “Secretary (Lloyd) welcomed Prime Minister’s perspective about the steps India and the United States should pursue together to cement the gains of the Major Defence Partnership and promote a free and open Indo-Pacific region”.

An Indo-US joint statement further laid out how the two countries “reaffirmed” the importance of a free, open, inclusive and resilient Indo-Pacific. The Quadrilateral or the Quad was seen as a force for global good for the peoples of the Indo-Pacific, the statement added.

Australia and Japan are the other two partners in the Quad.

Later, Lloyd, at a media interaction, said, “We should be able to sail the international seas and fly international airspace wherever authorised by law.” This was in reference to China’s hegemony seeking self-assumed control of the entire South China Sea and impeding international mercantile and naval shipping through the sea. The South China Sea connects the Indian Ocean with the Pacific.

“We have common values. We have common goals. We are working together and increasing interoperability,” Lloyd added.

Post the 2+2 meeting, Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra said, “We focused on regional developments. We shared common and shared challenges that India and United States face. The Quad and the Indo-Pacific were discussed and the meeting has helped India and the US work together.”

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 2-11-2023

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina jointly inaugurate three development projects

The 15-km Agartala-Akhaura Cross Border Rail Link is expected to boost cross-border trade and significantly reduce the travel time between Agartala and Calcutta via Dhaka

PTI, Agartala

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina on Wednesday jointly inaugurated three projects via virtual mode, including a key rail link between Tripura’s Nischintapur and Gangasagar in the neighbouring country.

The other two projects inaugurated by Modi and Hasina are the 65-km Khulna-Mongla Port Rail Line, and Unit 2 of the Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant in Bangladesh’s Rampal.

The 15-km Agartala-Akhaura Cross Border Rail Link is expected to boost cross-border trade and significantly reduce the travel time between Agartala and Kolkata via Dhaka.

“It is a matter of joy that we have connected once again to celebrate the success of the India-Bangladesh cooperation,” Modi said in an interaction with Hasina over video-conferencing.

“In the past nine years, the work we have done together has not happened in decades,” he said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 11-11-2023
India putting all its eggs in one basket in Bangladesh

The US and the West are pressing Hasina to appoint a caretaker government, a provision which she got removed from the Constitution.

Maj Gen Ashok K Mehta (Retd)

Military Commentator

WITH the 12th parliamentary elections in Bangladesh scheduled to be held in January 2024, two critical questions are echoing concerns from three previous elections: Will there be a caretaker government? And will the principal Opposition party, Begum Khaleda Zia-led Bangladesh National Party (BNP), take part to challenge Sheikh Hasina's bid for a third consecutive term as Prime Minister?

A visit to Dhaka last week made it clear that the ruling Awami League's (AL) Hasina is unlikely to support a caretaker regime, making it improbable for the BNP to contest the elections. A cross-section of the people whom I conversed with, including bada lok (rich people), bhadralok (intellectuals) and journalists, said if free and fair elections were held, the BNP would win.

During my stay, the BNP declared a hartal and a blockade. Coupled with the walkout by readymade garment workers over a wage dispute in factories, which account for 85 per cent of the country's \$55-billion exports, the fragile economy is poised to suffer further setbacks. Clashes between the BNP and a counter-strike by the AL have led to the arrest of top BNP leaders.

Anti-incumbency, price rise and corruption have led to a clamour for change. The battle between the two Begums is a proxy war between their sons, Tarique Rahman in London and Sajeeb Wazed in New York, the heir apparent to the top posts in the BNP and the AL, respectively. TIME, in its issue dated November 20, will feature Hasina on the cover, even as the caretaker regime gains a modicum of legitimacy with 40 smaller political parties registered to participate in the elections. The US and the West are pressing Hasina to appoint a caretaker government, a provision which she got removed from the Constitution. At the first Chanakya Defence Dialogue in New Delhi on November 3-4, former Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Shamsheer Chowdhury said the US, which has imposed visa restrictions on Bangladeshi citizens, should not push Hasina to make political choices. She has declined to enter into a dialogue with the BNP, which she refers to as a 'terrorist organisation'. She said: "Let Joe Biden sit for a dialogue with Donald Trump." Hasina alleges that the BNP and its fundamentalist ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, which is banned from contesting the elections, only want to create turmoil. Meenakshi Ganguly, Deputy Director, Human Rights Watch, Asia, says elections can't be free and fair if the Opposition is targeted. UN

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has said: "A clampdown on dissent is impermissible." India has refused to join this conversation, saying that it is Bangladesh's internal matter. Like the rest of South Asia, India is cautious about China's increasing influence in Dhaka. China, too, has remained silent on the matter.

With the election date expected to be announced shortly, Hasina is expediting the inauguration of projects before the model code of conduct comes into effect. Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Hasina jointly inaugurated the Agartala-Akhaura railway line, the Khulna-Mongla port line and unit II of the Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant, scripting a new chapter in connectivity. Though India backed the Liberation War of 1971, for which the AL is grateful, anti-India sentiment is widespread despite ongoing political and economic support. New Delhi voted for Hasina's daughter Saima Wazed as WHO's South-East Asia Director, annoying Nepal's nominee. Like in Sri Lanka, policymakers here say: "For security, we rely on India and for economic development, on China." Dhaka echoes these sentiments. Paradoxically, in their internal war games, the military portrays India as the 'Red Land' (the enemy).

India's defence cooperation has received a boost. While India has allocated a \$500-million Line of Credit exclusively for defence, the supplied equipment has predominantly been non-kinetic. Despite this, the Bangladesh military continues to source 80 per cent of its hardware from China, which has heavily invested in development projects such as the Dhaka Metro and Padma Bridge.

It is constructing a submarine base at Pequa near Cox's Bazar. Recently, the Bangladesh army acquired Chinese light tanks. India figures in Group C of their three-tier procurement policy. Besides institutional dialogue between the ministries of defence, interactions also take place at the tri-services level.

The military, which ruled Bangladesh for 15 years following the assassination of Mujibur Rahman in 1975, is now under civilian political control. This transition comes amid several corruption charges, including allegations against a serving Chief of Army Staff of aiding his two fugitive brothers.

The mutiny by the Bangladesh Rifles was the initial trigger. The political class has secured its loyalty by accommodating its interests, including deputation as ambassadors in four countries, appointments as chairmen of the Port Trust Authority, civil aviation, export promotion board, tea board, and positions in the Army Trust Bank. In protocol, unlike military officers in India, they rank much higher than their counterparts in civil services. Their one-star-rank officer is equivalent to Joint Secretary (two-star in India) and the Chief of Army Staff is equal to Cabinet Secretary. In India, Service Chiefs are one rung lower in Warrant of

Precedence than the Cabinet Secretary. But the bottom line seems to be that it will now not intervene in governance. The recent arrest of Lt Gen Hasan Suhrawardi (retd) for sedition and colluding with the BNP was unusual. So, too, was the report that army units were disarmed on October 28 while Hasina was visiting Chittagong.

The special relations between their 'freedom fighters' and Indian martyrs of the Liberation War are commemorated through several programmes. Indian military hospitals are providing treatment for the war-wounded of Bangladesh, and these facilities are also available for other soldiers.

On December 16, Vijay Diwas, Indian veterans of the Liberation War will travel to Dhaka, while freedom fighters will visit Eastern Command, Kolkata, for commemoration functions. Next year, a war memorial dedicated to 1,670 Indian martyrs will be inaugurated at Ashuganj by the two Prime Ministers. The Liberation War Museum, established in 2017 at the Centre for the Study of Genocide and Justice in Dhaka, pays tribute to India's contribution to Bangladesh's creation.

As in most countries in its neighbourhood, India has put all its eggs in one basket in Dhaka. A surprise return of the BNP could upset the applecart.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 7-11-2023

Nepal-India Border Meeting

India-Nepal border forces' talks begin in Delhi

PTI

New Delhi, Border guarding forces of India and Nepal began their three-day bilateral meeting in Delhi on Monday and discussed measures to curb trans-frontier crimes and for timely sharing of intelligence inputs, an official said.

Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) director general Rashmi Shukla is leading the Indian delegation at the seventh edition of the annual coordination talks and the visiting nine-member Armed Police Force (APF) team of Nepal is headed by its inspector general Raju Aryal. The meeting will end on November 8, the official said.

"The talks at the level of two heads of the forces serve as a crucial platform for both forces to engage in discussions on border-related matters," according to an official statement issued on Sunday.

"The SSB and APF delegations aim to strengthen the coordination between the two border guarding forces for more effective management of the open and unfenced India-Nepal border," it had said.

The focus of the meeting will be on the development of effective mechanisms to collaboratively combat trans-border crimes and facilitate the prompt exchange of critical information between the forces, the statement said.

The SSB is a central armed police force under the Union Home Ministry and it is tasked with guarding the 1,751 km India-Nepal open international border.

These annual talks have been held alternately in India and Nepal since 2012.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 7-11-2023

India, Bhutan agree to expand connectivity

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday conveyed to Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck India's strong commitment to its unique ties of friendship with the Himalayan nation and reiterated full support to the socio-economic development of Bhutan based on its priorities.

A joint statement issued after Modi-Wangchuck talks said the two sides agreed on a final location survey for the proposed cross-border rail link connecting Kokrajhar in Assam to Gelephu in Bhutan.

The two sides also agreed to consider establishing a rail link between Banarhat in West Bengal and Samtse in Bhutan.

Modi and Wangchuck "positively assessed" expanding the India-Bhutan partnership, including in new areas of connectivity in its "broadest form", cross-border trade infrastructure, trade and mutual investments, energy, health, education, space technology and people-to-people contacts, the statement said.

The Bhutan King began his eight-day visit to India from Guwahati on November 3. His high-profile trip to India came amid renewed push by Bhutan and China for an early settlement of their decades-old boundary dispute.

"In his interaction with His Majesty, the PM reaffirmed India's abiding commitment to its unique ties of friendship and cooperation with Bhutan and reiterated continued and full support to the socio-economic development in Bhutan based on the priorities of the royal government and as per the vision of His Majesty," the joint statement said.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 10-11-2023

Bangladeshi boy shot dead by BSF

Staff Correspondent, Rajshahi

A 14-year-old Bangladeshi boy was shot dead yesterday by the Indian Border Security Force when he crossed the border along Rajshahi and entered the neighbouring territory.

Samirul Islam, 14, son of Hasibul Islam of Ashriadaha area under Godagari upazila, died on the spot, said Lt Col Nahid Hossain, commanding officer of 53 BGB Battalion in Chapainawabganj.

The firing took place between border pillars 41/5-S and 41/6-S under BGB's DMC border outpost at 12:15pm, said the official in a text sent to The Daily Star.

BGB personnel rushed to the spot and held a flag meeting with 35 Battalion BSF at the zero line, where BGB strongly protested the killing of the child, CO Nahid told this correspondent.

In response, the BSF expressed deep regret and described it as an unexpected incident.

BSF officials also told the BGB that they would form an inquiry committee to investigate the incident and take action against the responsible person.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 2-11-2023

Hasina, Modi open 3 projects to foster trade, tourism, people to people contact

Diplomatic Correspondent

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi on Wednesday virtually inaugurated three projects implemented with Indian Concessional loan to foster trade, tourism and people to people contact. "This is a matter of great delight that we have again come together to celebrate the success of India-Bangladesh mutual cooperation. Our relations are seemingly reaching new heights continuously," said Sheikh Hasina.

Chief Minister of Tripura, India, Dr Manik Saha also virtually joined the event.

Sheikh Hasina said that Bangladesh and India were enjoying rare friendly relations and mutual cooperation.

"We will attain many successes in the days to come through mutual cooperation which will strengthen the relationship between the two countries," she said.

Modi said India will stay beside Bangladesh to transform it into developed, prosperous and smart country by 2041.

"The work we have done together in the last nine years was not accomplished even in the decades before this," Modi said.

Modi said, "It is a matter of happiness that we have come together to celebrate the success of India-Bangladesh cooperation. Our relations are touching new heights,"

Modi said, Akhaura-Agartala Cross-Border Railway Link, Khulna-Mongla Port railway line and the second unit of Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant at Rampal were built with Indian assistance to boost connectivity and energy security in the region.

He said there has been "remarkable progress" in India-Bangladesh relations.

The 12.24 km Akhaura-Agartala Cross-Border Railway Link, 6.78 km dual gauge in Bangladesh and 5.46 km in Tripura, India, has been executed with Indian grant worth Indian Rupee 392.52 crore.

Connectivity initiatives between India and Bangladesh proved to be a lifeline during the Covid-19 pandemic when India's Oxygen Express train supplied more than 4,000 tonnes of liquid medical oxygen to Bangladesh. Modi described the cross-border railway link between Akhaura and Agartala as the first railway connectivity between Bangladesh and north east India.

He said the Khulna-Mongla rail link connected trade centres in Dhaka with Kolkata.

On Monday, the trial run took place on this route when a freight train travelled from Bangladesh's Gangasagar to Nischintapur railway station in Agartala while the trial run of passenger train will take place soon, said officials.

The Khulna-Mongla Port Rail Line was laid with 69.18 per cent funding from India as credit to the project completed at a cost of \$388.92 million.

The construction work of approximately 64.7km rail line was completed at a cost of Tk 4,260 crore to usher in new opportunities in trade and commerce in the country's southwestern region, including the Mongla Port.

With opening of the rail link, Mongla, the second largest port of Bangladesh, has been connected with broad-gauge railway network.

The Maitree Super Thermal Power Project is in Rampal, Khulna.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 4-11-2023

India appreciates efforts to promote Indo-Lanka friendship, cooperation – FM Sitharaman

Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman called on Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena at Temple Trees on Thursday (November 2). The Prime Minister thanked India for the allocation of Indian Rs.824 million under the Memorandum of Understanding signed during the visit of the Finance Minister for solar electrification of religious places out of the Indian grant assistance of Indian Rs.1.07 billion earmarked for the promotion of Buddhist ties.

Indian Finance Minister said India highly appreciates Prime Minister Gunawardena's unstinted efforts to promote Indo-Lanka friendship and cooperation. "Decades ago when we were fighting for our Independence, your parents associated in Indian freedom struggle and now as Prime Minister you are continue to work towards further strengthening bilateral friendship and cooperation between our two countries and we have very high regards for you," she said.

Indian High Commissioner Gopal Bagley and Secretary to the Prime Minister Anura Dissanayake and senior officials of the two countries were also present on this occasion.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 3-11-2023

Inter-Parliamentary meeting between Sri Lanka, EU held

Welcomes reconciliation, human rights efforts

The eleventh Inter-Parliamentary consultations between Sri Lanka and the delegation for relations with the countries of South Asia of the European Parliament (DSAS) were convened on Tuesday (31) at the Sri Lanka Parliamentary premises.

A multi-party delegation led by Foreign Affairs Minister M.U.M. Ali Sabry PC, participated in an interactive discussion with the visiting EU delegation led by Heidi HAUTALA Finnish Member of the European Parliament (MEP) from the group of the Greens who is also Vice-President and the Rapporteur for New GSP Regulation of the European Parliament.

The discussion centred on matters related to bilateral cooperation in the context of further consolidating ties between the two legislatures. Sri Lanka side apprised the MEPs of the current economic and political developments in the country and also on overall progress in reconciliation and human rights situation including proposed Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA). The EU Co-chair HAUTALA welcomed progress in EU – Sri Lanka bilateral relations and briefed on issues of importance to the EU such as new climate friendly regulations being adopted in the EU (European Green Deal), Ukraine conflict, inflation in the European region and future EU integration.

The Sri Lanka delegation also highlighted the importance of GSP+ concessions which provides duty free access for Sri Lanka's exports to the EU market and requested support of the European Parliament for continued access to the concessions.

Foreign Affairs State Minister Tharaka Balasuriya, and eight MPs representing the Government and the Opposition parties of Sri Lanka, including the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) participated.

The visiting delegation also comprised Zdzislaw Marek KRASNODEBSKI Polish MEP from the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), Karsten LUCKE German MEP from Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S & D), and Ausra MALDEIKIENE Lithuanian MEP from the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats/EPP).

Senior officials of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, and the Commerce Department of Sri Lanka, and officials from the EU delegation in Colombo also participated.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 12-11-2023

Beijing to reopen fourth border point with Nepal

The closure of the Chinese border in 2020 has affected a large number of Nepalis exporting goods such as handmade carpets and handicrafts to China.

Krishana Prasain

China has decided to reopen the Korala border point for both trade and travel movements from Monday onwards after a hiatus of four years since it was closed.

Nepal shares a 1,400-km long border with Tibet along the Himalayan range.

China allows trade and transit through six border points—Tatopani-Khasa, Rasuwa-Kerung, Yari (Humla)-Purang, Olangchung Gola-Riwu, Kimathanka-Riwu and Nechung (Mustang)-Lizi—for bilateral trade with Nepal.

Korala is the fourth border point that Beijing has reopened after the Rasuwa-Kerung, Tatopani-Khasa and Yari (Humla)-Purang, which had remained closed since 2020 after the Covid-19 pandemic struck.

“The Nechung (Mustang)-Lizi border is being opened in a full-fledged manner for the first time,” said Janak Raj Pant, the chief district officer of Mustang.

“We have already distributed passes to Nepalis willing to travel across the Chinese border.”

He, however, said that Nepalis could travel up to 30 km from the Korala onto the Chinese side.

A road connecting Jomsom and Korala has also been built.

Nepal and China welcomed the successful opening of the Lizi-Nechung port near the Tibet border during Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's visit to China in late September this year.

The port is situated across the border from Korala village in the Mustang district.

An inauguration programme is scheduled to be held at the Korala border by allowing goods-laden containers to enter Nepal on Monday, said Pant.

The closure of the Chinese border in early 2020 has affected a large number of Nepali entrepreneurs exporting goods like handmade carpets and handicrafts to China.

A trade fair used to be held at the Korala border point and was a vital source of income for Nepali traders living in the remote Himalayan region, said Pant.

Nepal has its customs, quarantine, immigration and police offices in Korala, about 8 km from the Tibet border.

The opening of the Chinese border has sent imports soaring from China.

According to the Department of Customs, Nepal imported goods worth Rs79.82 billion in the first three months of the current fiscal year from China, up 42.42

percent compared to the same period in the last fiscal year.

The exports, too, have increased. The customs data shows that exports to China jumped 345.9 percent to Rs732.36 million in the review period.

Nepal's trade deficit with China, however, remained at Rs79 billion in the review period.

China is Nepal's second-largest trade partner after India. China provides zero-tariff treatment to about 8,000 products from Nepal under its duty-free market access scheme for least developed countries (LDCs).

"Reopening of more borders in the north is a good sign for Nepal's trade," said Chandra Ghimire, former secretary of the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies. "What's worrying is China's unstable policy of opening and closing the borders unilaterally."

According to the South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), Nepal's trade relationship with China has been hit hard by a combination of natural disasters, the most significant one being the 2015 earthquake, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has led to significant disruptions on cross-border trade between the two nations.

According to a study conducted by SAWTEE on Nepal-China Trade, between 2020 and 2022, over 90 percent of the value of goods exported to China from Nepal were covered by the zero-duty list for the least developed countries (LDCs), but the utilisation of preferences averaged 68 percent.

In a roundtable SAWTEE held in Kathmandu on Thursday under the theme 'Nepal-China Trade: Prospects and Challenges', Rupesh Tha, research officer of SAWTEE, said although China stands as Nepal's second-largest trading partner, the trade balance has distinctly favoured China.

He said it is vital for Nepal to fully harness the advantages of zero-tariff treatment provided to over 8,000 products originating in Nepal and diversify its exports to China.

Current bilateral agreements, such as the Trade and Payment Agreement 1981, are outdated and ill-suited to the present circumstances and need to be reviewed, he said. "This is particularly pertinent as Nepal grapples with a significant trade deficit with China."

In the same programme, Rabi Shanker Sainju, former joint secretary at the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies, said that Nepal's trade with China is adversely affected by high transportation costs resulting from its inadequate logistics infrastructure.

"With the evolution of the landscape of the Chinese consumer market, demand for high-quality products has increased, and this must be taken into account when looking to boost exports to China," he added.

The specific challenges arising from the sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures impacting Nepali products require prompt attention, as do the specific issues surrounding transportation, connectivity, and logistical aspects, in both exports and imports with China, experts said.

"Korala trade point will connect central Nepal with the Chinese markets. It will benefit Nepal in both investment and trade," said Ghimire.

Ghimire added that Nepal and China need to sort out the issue of the rules of origin which has been creating hassles for Nepali products to enter the Chinese market.

In May this year, the Tatopani border point was reopened for two-way cargo movements, eight years after the devastating earthquake of April 2015. In September this year, Beijing reopened the Tatopani-Khasa border point for people's movement.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 12-11-2023

Chinese 'regional approach' apparent in Tibet delegation's Gandaki outreach

As the region bordering Nepal, Beijing assigns Tibet to work with Kathmandu on BRI projects, observers say.

Anil Giri

After six years of dismal progress on projects under the Belt and Road Initiative in Nepal, the Chinese seem to have taken also a regional approach south of the Himalayas to extend Xi Jinping's flagship connectivity arm.

This was apparent in the way the Tibet regional secretary of the Communist Party of China held meetings in Kathmandu and Pokhara. Wang Junzheng, the CPC secretary for Xizang Autonomous Region of China, visited the province and met with its chief minister.

The visit by Wang, Beijing's focal person for Nepal affairs, is significant, say observers and experts. It has drawn attention in Kathmandu, particularly with China's direct engagement with a provincial government in Nepal.

In Kathmandu, Wang said that his visit was focused on implementing the agreements and understandings signed between Nepal and China during the recent visit of Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal to China and the visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Nepal in 2019.

Pokhara is significant for the Chinese from the BRI point of view. The Chinese side claimed the new airport was built with a loan from Beijing under the north's global connectivity project despite rebuttal by Nepali officials.

Nepal has sought China's help in making the international project operational, especially given India's reluctance to conduct flights to the Lake City from cities across Nepal's southern border.

Gandaki Chief Minister Surendra Pandey had requested Wang to help Nepal commercially operate the Pokhara International Airport, which was built by a Chinese contractor. “Basically, we asked them to begin regular and direct flights from Lhasa, Chengdu and Guangzhou to Pokhara,” he said.

The Tibetan delegation has pledged to send a team to Pokhara to study the possibility of operating regular flights from three Chinese cities, according to the chief minister.

“If Chinese planes get passengers regularly, there will be no difficulty conducting regular flights from Chinese cities. In particular, they told us that they will help us build health-related and infrastructure projects at our request,” Pandey told the Post over the phone from Pokhara.

“As Gandaki Province adjoins Tibet, they said it falls within their priority [area]. They assured assistance to Gandaki Province, primarily in infrastructure and health sectors. They have also asked us to officially express our needs so that they can extend possible cooperation.” The Chinese delegation is scheduled to leave for Sri Lanka on Sunday after the four-day Nepal visit.

In Kathmandu, they called on President Ramchandra Paudel, Vice President Ramsahay Prasad Yadav, Prime Minister Dahal, National Assembly Chairman Ganesh Prasad Timilsina and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha, among others.

The meeting with President Paudel was not on the itinerary, an official at the President's Office said. “After constant pressure from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we arranged the meeting.”

Matters of mutual interests, including trade, connectivity, tourism and people-to-people contact were discussed, according to a brief read-out issued by the prime minister's private secretariat. A communique sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Wang's visit aimed at maintaining ‘good momentum of high-level exchanges between the two countries’.

Notably, Wang, who is known as a powerful party leader in Tibet, did not meet any leftist party leaders in Nepal.

In Pokhara, according to Chief Minister Pandey, the Chinese said they would open the Korala border pass on Monday and assist Gandaki Province in its development endeavours. The border point was shut by the Chinese for four years. The decision to open it was communicated to the Nepali side during a recent meeting.

The Chinese leaders also invited Chief Minister Pandey to visit Tibet.

Uendra Gautam, secretary general of the China Study Center, said China has a policy of mobilising the provinces to execute BRI and this visit is related to the implementation of the Chinese flagship project.

“In line with the Chinese way of doing things, the BRI has several components and intricacies. They are mobilising several provinces in order to implement the BRI in regions bordering China. As Tibet is adjacent to Nepal, Beijing naturally wants the Tibetan provincial government to take the lead for the BRI's execution in the country,” said Gautam.

Signed between Nepal and China in 2017, the multi-billion-dollar Chinese flagship project has made little progress despite tall promises from both sides. The two sides still await the finalisation of the draft BRI implementation plan.

Before Nepal signed the BRI, an action plan released by the Chinese central government stated that Tibet would work with Nepal in implementing the BRI and would work closely with the government of Nepal in areas like cultural promotion, development, and trade and commercial cooperation. “The Chinese side has an institutional design and a set-up for BRI execution. The central government and its various agencies prepared a design to take forward the BRI and the visit should be viewed in this context,” said Gautam. “Wang's trip to Pokhara also aimed at exploring the BRI's execution in Nepal. Some experts wrongly see this visit through the geopolitical lens.”

On Saturday evening, the Tibetan delegation met DPM Shrestha and stressed that their focus was on the agreements and understandings reached during the visits of Dahal to Beijing and Xi to Kathmandu. They stated that the meetings with Dahal, Pandey and other leaders were fruitful and expressed their happiness at Nepal's commitment to one-China policy, according to the private secretariat of DPM Shrestha.

Wang said China will extend more support to Nepal to help the people affected by the recent earthquake, according to the secretariat. “All border points have opened, and transit and transport facilities have resumed... China is helping with 20 million RMB for Nepal's administrative reform. This economic assistance is in its final stage,” Wang said.

Shrestha, during the meeting, discussed lack of coordination on border security between the two countries because in Nepal, the central government looks after border and boundary affairs while in China the same is handled at central, provincial and county levels.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 4-11-2023

Military advisor offers Iran-China understanding regarding threats, interests

TEHRAN - Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, a senior military advisor to the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, has suggested that Tehran and Beijing should agree on a common understanding concerning

threats and interests, the official IRNA news agency reported on Thursday.

“The armed forces of China and Iran should reach a shared understanding regarding different threats and common interests,” Rahim Safavi said in a meeting with General Zhang Youxia, vice chairman of China’s Central Military Commission (CMC), on the sidelines of the Beijing Xiangshan Forum themed “Common Security, Lasting Peace”.

Rahim Safavi suggested giving priority to establishing common security and sustainable peace among the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and formulation of a non-aggression pact.

He suggested that preventing aggression among the SCO members could serve as a paradigm for such initiatives.

Furthermore, he hailed China’s recognition of Iran’s role in regional affairs and its congratulations to the Islamic Republic for its membership in both the SCO and BRICS.

The former chief of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps also addressed the United States’ “unlawful and inhumane unilateral coercive measures”, underscoring the crucial role of the Chinese government in countering the American government’s pursuit of hegemonic power and unilateral policies.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Rahim Safavi emphasized the oppression against Palestinian people and their legal rights.

He considered the Al-Aqsa Storm operation by the Palestinian resistance group Hamas against Israel a legitimate act of defense against 75 years of occupation of the Palestinian lands by the Zionist regime of Israel.

He also reprimanded Washington’s unwavering support for the Zionist regime in its war on the Gaza Strip, saying the U.S. is in full command of the ongoing war that started on October 7.

The top military advisor described the Zionist regime’s war on Gaza as “genocide” and insisted on the need to immediately announce a truce in the war and deliver humanitarian aid, including water, food, medicine, and fuel, to the besieged enclave of Gaza.

Major General Rahim Safavi also said the role of China is highly important to counter the American hegemony and unilateralism in the world.

Rahim Safavi also held talks with the chief of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) on geopolitics.

As an important think tank, CICIR has a great share in crafting China’s strategic policies.

The assistant to the Leader of the Islamic Revolution also shared views with the director of the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) on issues in Asia and the larger world.

Rahim Safavi also visited the People’s Liberation Army Academy of Military Sciences.

“Iranian military is an important partner of China’s army”

For his part, General Zhang praised the participation of the top Iranian military advisor in the Beijing Xiangshan Forum and said China and Iran have been guarding their good relationship in the highly volatile world.

Zhang also said China is aware of Iran’s role in the West Asia region and greeted Iran’s membership in the SCO and BRIC.

Iran gained full membership of the SCO in July 2023. It became the ninth member of the bloc at the 23rd summit of the SCO Council of Heads of States

Also, Iran will officially join BRICS as of January 1, 2024.

The CMC vice chairman also said Iran’s “armed forces are one of the important partners of China’s army” and the presidents of the two countries attach great importance to the promotion of cooperation in different areas, IRNA reported.

Xiangshan Forum

The 10th Beijing Xiangshan Forum officially began on October 30 with representatives from a record number of countries, regions, and international organizations.

Foreign experts who participated at the forum said the event provided all parties with a platform to talk in a frank manner that contributes to better communication, better understanding of each other’s positions, and better resolutions to questions, the Global Times reported.

Official delegations from more than 90 countries, regions and international organizations participated in the forum.

It featured high-end dialogues, a leading experts dialogue, a seminar by young military officers and scholars, and a symposium on Sun Tzu’s Art of War

Four plenary sessions were held with a focus on Major Countries’ Responsibility and Global Security Cooperation, the Role of Developing Countries in Global Security, Asia-Pacific Security Architecture: Present and Future, as well as Regional Security and Development: Goals and Roads.

China’s Assistant Foreign Minister Nong Rong said in a speech at the forum on Tuesday that China would hold high-level conferences on the Global Security Initiative (GSI) at an appropriate time. Experts and many delegates reached by the Global Times at the forum said that the so-called rules-based international order has already caused at least two major geopolitical crises in Europe and the Middle East, so it is time for the world to form a new order that can realize “common security” and “lasting peace,” which are the themes of the forum. They said the China-proposed GSI is an important contribution to this global demand.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 12-11-2023

Afghanistan should uphold Iran's water rights: MP

TEHRAN – An Iranian lawmaker on Saturday called on Afghanistan's interim government to properly supply Iran with its share of water from the Hirmand River, and stay committed to a 1973 water-sharing treaty between the two countries.

"All agreements with the Afghan side should lead to the realization of the Hirmand River water rights, as the lives of one million people in the northern part of Sistan-Baluchestan province depend on the water of the Hirmand River," said Mohammad Sargazi during an interview with Iranian media.

The parliament member declared that the legislative body called on the foreign ministry to discuss the issue with an Afghan delegation which visited Tehran last Saturday.

"Our demand is that in exchange for providing abundant services to our brothers in Afghanistan and their residents in Iran, they should also fulfill their own promise. It definitely should not be a one-sided interaction, just as they are seeking to secure their interests in relation to Iran, we also need to secure the interests of the people of Iran," Sargazi noted.

Iran and Afghanistan, both of which grappling with low rainfall due to environmental changes, have been locked in a tussle over the water share of the Hirmand River for more than two decades now.

The Hirmand River is considered to be the only vital waterway in Iran's southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchestan. The river takes its source in the Baba Mountains of Afghanistan.

Since the Taliban took over in 2021, the de facto leaders of Afghanistan have emphasized adherence to the Hirmand treaty, but in practice, Iran has not received its due share of water from the river. This has caused tensions to grow between the two sides in recent months.

Iran is lawfully supposed to receive an annual share of 820 million cubic meters from Hirmand.

- MHA/PA

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 11-11-2023

Fishermen's plight

COMPASSION has always been missing from the Pakistan-India equation, and poor fishermen are perhaps the easiest targets for authorities on either side to scoop up, keep in jail for a few years and then return at an 'appropriate' time as a 'goodwill' gesture. Their crime? Crossing a maritime boundary that is not demarcated while in search of catch. When they are released, it becomes a media event, as charities provide them gifts and cash, and they are finally allowed to return. A

similar episode occurred on Thursday in Karachi, as 80 Indian fishermen were released and put on a train to Lahore so that they could cross over to their homeland. Most had been detained in Pakistan for three to four years. Activists said that while the foreign anglers had been treated well by local authorities, they were worried about how their families in India would be faring economically. Activists also said that currently, there are around 89 Pakistani fishermen incarcerated in India.

Being kept away from their families has a devastating psychological and economic impact on the fishermen; most of them come from humble backgrounds, and if their boats are confiscated, they have to start from zero. While bilateral relations are in a deep freeze at the moment, Pakistan and India can surely address the issue of fishermen as a priority, on a humanitarian basis. If fisherfolk stray into the other state's territory, they should be warned by the authorities to turn back instead of being detained. Activists have also advocated the creation of a maritime 'buffer zone' where fisherfolk from both states can fish freely. Workable solutions to the plight of fishermen can be found should both capitals seek to end their misery. While thornier issues on the bilateral agenda may take time to resolve, the fishermen's matter — linked to the Sir Creek dispute — should be relatively easy to address.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 8-11-2023

US says it values ties with Pakistan

US underscored its continual partnership with Pakistan in various areas of mutual interest between the two countries

By Wajid Ali Syed

WASHINGTON: The US on Tuesday underscored its continual partnership with Pakistan in various areas of mutual interest between the two countries.

"We have partnered with Pakistan for more than 40 years to support law enforcement, rule of law, counter narcotics efforts, and other areas in the security space," the State Department's principal deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said during a press briefing. He acknowledged that large-scale military assistance to Pakistan remains suspended and added, "We continue to value our bilateral relationship." He said that the department was aware of the reports of multiple attacks on Pakistani security forces and facilities earlier in November. The spokesperson also offered condolences. He clarified that there was no (military) equipment left behind by American forces during the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Patel said the US commitment to the people of Afghanistan was enduring. "The US continues to be the single largest humanitarian donor to the people of Afghanistan."

Responding to another question, he said that in any country the US was not supportive of one particular party or government over the other. "In the context of any election, it continues to be paramount that elections are held in a free and fair manner and reflect the will of the people residing in that country," he said.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 9-11-2023

Pakistan says no arms deal with Ukraine **SHAFQAT ALI**

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan yesterday rejected any discussion on arms supply between defence ministers of Pakistan and Ukraine in their recent telephonic conversation. Commenting on speculations, Foreign Office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch said as a matter of policy "Pakistan does not supply arms to a region in conflict. It has not supplied nor does it intend to supply any arms to Ukraine."

She added: "This topic, therefore, was not discussed during the telephonic conversation between the ministers of defence of Pakistan and Ukraine on 7th November 2023." She said Pakistan maintains a policy of not supplying arms to regions in conflict and has no intention to supply arms to Ukraine. The spokesperson said Pakistan has emphasized the need for a negotiated solution to the conflict in Ukraine and has not publicly denounced Russia, despite pressure from the US and its western allies. Earlier, Pakistan had rejected a news story alleging the sale of Pakistani weapons to Ukraine for an IMF bailout package, considering it baseless and fabricated.

This week, Defense Minister Rustem Umerov discussed in a telephone conversation with Pakistan's Minister for Defence and Defence Production Lt Gen (retd) Anwar Ali Hyder support of bilateral relations between the two countries. "Spoke today with Pakistan's Minister for Defence & Defence Production Lieutenant General (Retd) Anwar Ali Hyder. I'm grateful for Pakistan's contribution to Ukraine's capabilities. It was a pleasure to discuss areas of mutual interest as we maintain our bilateral relationship," Umerov said on X.

Though it has tried to maintain a neutral position where the Russia-Ukraine conflict is concerned, Islamabad's principled stance poses a challenge as Pakistan and Ukraine have remained defence partners since the late 1990s. From 1991 to 2020, the Ukraine-Pakistan defence contracts were valued at around \$1.6 billion, as reported by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, an arms control watchdog. According to Jane's, a leading publication on global defence matters, Pakistan has been a major recipient of Ukraine's advanced T-80 UD tanks since 1997. Significantly, Pakistan started importing discounted crude oil from Russia in April under a deal struck between Moscow and Islamabad. While bringing economic relief to cash-strapped Pakistan, together with geopolitical benefits,

this step may also help Islamabad in its balancing act between Moscow and Kyiv following Russia's 2022 invasion.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 10-11-2023

China-US relations still face challenges, with a long way to go to stabilize and improve: Chinese Ambassador to the US

By Global Times

Chinese Ambassador to the US Xie Feng commended the signs of a more stable China-US relationship, but said the relations are still facing grave challenges. To move toward a potential meeting between the presidents in San Francisco, it is important to return to the Bali consensus, enhance whole-process management, and work in the same direction, he said.

The remarks were made when he attended the Hong Kong Forum on US-China Relations 2023 via video link on Thursday amid the background that Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng and US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen are scheduled to start two days of meetings in San Francisco on Thursday US time, as China and the US are under a fresh round of economic and trade talks.

As China-US relations suffered from serious difficulties in the past few years and hit the lowest point since the establishment of diplomatic ties, there has also been a growing call for stopping the downward spiral. Ambassador Xie said that under guidance of the presidents of the two countries with joint efforts of both sides, there have been some positive signs of a more stable China-US relationship recently. The two sides have conducted a series of high-level interactions, launched a series of dialogue mechanisms, and reignited exchanges and cooperation at various levels.

All these have together sent out a positive signal of stabilizing China-US relations. Both sides believe that it is beneficial and necessary for the two countries to maintain dialogue, both share the hope to stabilize and improve bilateral relations as soon as possible, and both have agreed to work together toward a meeting between the two presidents in San Francisco, Xie said.

Xie said that China-US relations are still facing grave challenges, and there remains a long way to go to stabilize and improve the bilateral relationship.

The top priority is for both sides to make joint efforts toward a meeting between the two presidents in San Francisco. To move toward San Francisco, it is important to return to the Bali consensus, and earnestly act on the important common understanding reached between the two presidents in Bali; to enhance whole-process management, foster a sound atmosphere before dialogue, build up positive outcomes during the process, and take solid follow-up actions afterwards; and to work in the same direction, clear obstacles and manage

differences with concrete actions, and enhance dialogue and cooperation in good faith, Xie said.

Ambassador Xie said that as the world is emerging from the pandemic, China-US relations also need to come out of the woods. He encouraged people from various sectors in both countries to travel more and have more dialogue and exchanges, so as to gradually thaw the ice of misunderstanding and misperception, and build bridges for mutual understanding.

Notably, coming just days before the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation informal leaders' meeting in San Francisco, the new round of economic and trade talks is a major development in rapidly intensifying engagements between the two countries to stabilize bilateral ties and pave the way for potential higher-level talks, analysts noted.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 8-11-2023

How Canberra handles AUKUS bears upon future of China-Australia relations **By Global Times**

AUKUS, the trilateral security partnership between the US, UK and Australia, has always been a center of contradiction between Beijing and Canberra. As the knots in the dispute between China and Australia in areas such as trade are slowly untied, if Canberra cannot tackle the issue concerning the AUKUS well and allow itself to continue to be hijacked by the US' policy, this pact is likely to be an impediment to the China-Australia relations.

According to Reuters on Monday, the Joe Biden administration will send a high-level delegation to Australia this week for a series of meetings to review the progress of the AUKUS.

The US and Australia, are currently accelerating the AUKUS build-up. Last month, President Biden reaffirmed the country's commitment to the security pact when he met the visiting Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese who expressed his hope that the US Congress would pass legislation related to the AUKUS this year.

The US delegation's visit to Australia comes at a time when China's relations with the US and Australia are on the upswing: Albanese just wrapped up his visit to China on Tuesday as the first Australian prime minister to visit China in seven years, while Chinese and US leaders are expected to meet on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Leaders' Summit in San Francisco, almost one year after their last face-to-face meeting.

Although the delegation's Australia trip cannot hinder the general trend of China-Australia relations moving toward further improvement, it will undoubtedly do no

good to China-Australia relations if Australia continues to play an active role as a pusher in the construction of the AUKUS.

The cooperation under the AUKUS framework is based on shared ideology and political consensus between the US and its core allies, aiming to strengthen deeper exchanges in the defense sphere. However, the trilateral alliance, in fact, implies bloc confrontation and Cold War thinking, intending to coordinate with the US' Indo-Pacific Strategy to constrain and suppress China.

China, among other regional countries, has expressed its deep concerns regarding the AUKUS since its founding. According to Chinese military expert Song Zhongping, apart from the issue of possible nuclear proliferation, China is also quite worried that AUKUS will become an important cornerstone for building an Asia-Pacific NATO. In particular, the three AUKUS countries are seeking to recruit more allies and partners in the region into the pact.

"In the context of the US treating China as a hypothetical, systematic rival, AUKUS, once it expands, will become an efficient and pragmatic anti-China military mechanism in the Asia-Pacific region," Song told the Global Times.

Australia's geographic proximity to China and its pivotal role in the US' Indo-Pacific strategy require Washington to keep a firm grip on Canberra. To solidify its strategic alliance with Canberra, Washington has to up the ante. Therefore, the US even gives the green light to Australia over sensitive defense and intelligence sectors, such as nuclear submarine technology, that often appear to be "off-limits" in Washington's cooperation with other allies and partners, Song noted.

Through AUKUS, the US hopes to make Australia serve its hegemonic strategy. It promises so-called security guarantees to Canberra, but becoming cannon fodder for Washington will be the fate of Australia instead of actually benefiting from the partnership. Therefore, Australia must be highly vigilant about this, asking itself: Is it really a wise decision to rashly fulfill US interests and threaten China's security amid warming China-Australia relations?

The bilateral ties between China and Australia should be developed based on the interests of the two countries, independent from the enhancement of the US-Australia alliance. If issues involving the US-Australia military alliance, such as AUKUS, are not resolved, it means that Australia is attempting to develop its relationship with China according to its ties with the US. This will make it difficult for the China-Australia relationship to develop sustainably. And as the US continues to hijack Australian politics to a large extent, it will only complicate the China-Australia ties and inject more uncertainties into the bilateral relationship.

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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 5-11-2023
Will break all records in 2024 Lok Sabha
polls: PM Modi

Says speed and scale of the development of India is noteworthy

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday said the ruling dispensation would return to power in 2024 with a record result and hailed India's movement from an era of "record scams to record exports."

Addressing a media summit here, the PM, while flagging the theme of the Summit, 'Breaking Barriers', said the underlying message being put across was that the present government will break all records and come out victorious in the upcoming General Election. "2024 General Election results will be beyond barriers", Modi remarked, adding that the speed and scale of the development of India was noteworthy.

The PM said every Indian was brimming with confidence now and by 2047, the topic of discussion in summits would be "Developed India, what next."

Modi said India's rise had ensured that from the poorest to the richest everyone believes "this is Bharat's time."

The Prime Minister said neo middle class was powering consumption trends.

"Neo-middle class are giving momentum to the consumption growth of the country," the PM said noting that the BJP Government had overcome several past barriers, including of decision-making on key issues.

The Prime Minister flagged past governments' reluctance to take the issue of Abrogation of Article 370 head on saying "a needless psychological mind block existed around the issue as if abrogation would make the heavens fall."

"But the abrogation has ensured terrorism is reducing and tourism growing," PM said.

He said common citizens feel empowered and encouraged today and added, "Pace and scale of development of today's India is a sign of its success."

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 2-11-2023
Sonia Gandhi attacks PM Modi over
Manipur, says 'BJP has divided
society bitterly'

Six months of suffering have gone by, but there is no effort towards peace and reconciliation, says the Congress leader

Sanjay K. Jha, New Delhi

The Congress has mounted a multi-pronged attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, questioning his policies, performance and administrative acumen as the party

firmly believes that the enervated BJP relies solely on him to see it through elections.

Highlighting issues like the Manipur unrest, high prices of essential commodities, unfulfilled promises and crony capitalism, the Congress is trying to weave an impression that Modi is the main reason for the plethora of problems. There is a pattern in the Congress's attack on Modi — Priyanka Gandhi Vadra had a few days ago recalled decisions like demonetisation and the now-scrapped farm laws to question his leadership credentials.

While the BJP hasn't announced chief ministerial faces in any of the election-bound states and kept the focus away from the local infrastructure, the Prime Minister naturally becomes the key interface between the party and the voters.

The BJP had adopted a similar strategy in Karnataka earlier this year, given the discredited local leadership, but lost the election.

Sonia Gandhi on Wednesday targeted Modi for the mishandling of the crisis in Manipur, which has been in the throes of unprecedented turmoil for six months.

Issuing a video appeal to the voters of Mizoram, the Congress leader said: "In Manipur, the BJP has divided society bitterly. Six months of suffering have gone by, but there is no effort towards peace and reconciliation. The Prime Minister is completely silent and has not seen it fit to visit Manipur for even a few hours."

Modi was scheduled to campaign in Mizoram on October 30 but the tour was cancelled against the backdrop of anger at his inflexible stand on Manipur. He has refused to change his attitude towards Manipur even as the Opposition parties, citizens and human rights activists have expressed outrage over the drift in the state.

Sonia said: "Today, democracy is under threat from the BJP and the RSS in Mizoram, in the Northeast and across India. They value neither diversity, nor democracy, nor dialogue. They want to impose uniformity across India. In Parliament, the BJP forces laws which weaken the rights of tribals to their land and forests and does not even allow the Mizoram member of Parliament to speak. The MNF and the ZPM say they are independent, but are they really? No, I believe they are not. They are gateways for the BJP into Mizoram. The Congress party will never compromise with the BJP."

Campaigning in Telangana, Rahul Gandhi said: "I am not Narendra Modi. I fulfil promises. Modi promised Rs 15 lakh each to everybody, but not one rupee came into your accounts while lakhs of crores flew into Adani's account." He referred to Modi's perceived politics of vendetta by arguing that all Opposition leaders were

facing cases while the Telangana chief minister had been spared because he was working with the central government.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, who addressed public meetings in Chhattisgarh, said Modi distorted history, gave the impression that India attained freedom in 2014 when he came to power, did not work for the welfare of the poor, helped crony capitalists and acted like a dictator. Kharge blamed Modi for the high prices of LPG cylinders, petrol and diesel, vegetables, pulses and other items. He warned Dalits and tribals that all their rights would be snatched one by one if the Congress was not voted to power.

Addressing a media conference at Raipur in Chhattisgarh, Congress communications chief Jairam Ramesh said: “The Prime Minister cannot speak the truth even by mistake. He said here that the Nagarnar Steel Plant would not be privatised. But the truth is that his government has been trying to sell the plant since October 2020. Even the Bhilai Steel Plant will be sold if the BJP continues to be in power.”

He added: “We all know trains are delayed or cancelled in Chhattisgarh because priority is given to freight trains transporting coal for Adani. Modi is attacking federalism and indulging in discrimination against Opposition-ruled states. The BJP has no issues and is relying solely on religious polarisation. The Prime Minister, the home minister, the Assam chief minister... see their speeches. We are fighting elections on local issues, people’s concerns.”

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 15-11-2023

Election Commission sends notices to Priyanka Gandhi, Arvind Kejriwal over jibes at PM Modi

In its showcase notices to Kejriwal and Priyanka on Tuesday on complaints of the BJP, the EC has asked them to explain their statements by Thursday

Pheroze L. Vincent, New Delhi

The Election Commission of India (EC) on Tuesday issued notices to AAP national convener and Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra for alleged jibes linking Prime Minister Narendra Modi with industrialists.

The poll panel is yet to penalise or exonerate Priyanka and Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma for the notices it sent them last month. Priyanka was served the notice for insinuating that the Prime Minister was stingy in donating to a temple while Sarma had allegedly passed communal remarks against a Chhattisgarh minister from a minority community. The Mizoram

polls and the first phase of the Chhattisgarh polls have since concluded.

In its showcase notices to Kejriwal and Priyanka on Tuesday on complaints of the BJP, the EC has asked them to explain their statements by Thursday.

The poll panel has found Kejriwal’s remarks linking the Prime Minister to industrialist Gautam Adani defamatory. Trinamul MP Mahua Moitra is also under the glare of the Parliamentary Ethics Committee for allegedly asking questions to harm the prospects of the Adani group in lieu of bribes by a rival industrialist.

Kejriwal has been accused of violating Section 123 (4) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and sections 171G, 499 and 501 of Indian Penal Code, as well as sections of and the Model Code of Conduct all of which prohibit false and defamatory statements.

Under the EC’s glare are two Hindi videos on the AAP’s X (formerly Twitter) page. The first titled “Modi’s interesting routine”, on November 8, talks of a person eating lakhs worth of mushrooms, doing yoga poses on camera and taking “orders from Adani ji”.

The second, posted the following day, contains an image of a fabricated poster with the title “Bharatiya Jumla Party Presents” and comprising a large image of Adani along with a smaller image of the Prime Minister in the foreground with the words “Sarkar Janta Ke Liye Nahi Malik Ke Liye Kaam Karte Hain” on top and the words “Scam 2023 and The Modi Adani Story”.

Priyanka has been served a notice for her speech on November 10 in Madhya Pradesh’s Sanwer in which she said: “Modi ji, this was Bhel which provided employment to us and was making the country progress... Why did you give it to your big industrialist friends?”

The Modi government has repeatedly denied plans to privatise the Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (Bhel). Recently, trade unions opposed a joint venture between Bhel and an Italian firm to make Vande Bharat coaches.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 4-11-2023

Terms of Trade | A state-wise look at the stakes in upcoming assembly polls

Roshan Kishore

In three days, on November 7, Mizoram and parts of Chhattisgarh will go to polls, and on November 17, the rest of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh will see elections, followed by Rajasthan on November 27 and Telangana on November 30. All results will come out on December 3.

This is the last round of assembly elections before the 2024 general elections, many have dubbed it as the semi final before the grand finale. Such an approach, as a previous edition of this column pointed out, is incorrect

because of a stark difference in the 2018 and 2019 results in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Does this make the forthcoming election cycle irrelevant outside these states? Not necessarily. This is best understood by a state-by-state analysis of the forthcoming elections.

Let's start with Mizoram. With just one Lok Sabha MP, this state is the least consequential as far as the 2024 arithmetic is concerned. The ruling Mizo National Front (MNF), despite being a part of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), is fighting the elections against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as well. While part of the MNF's politics is explained by its historical antipathy towards the Congress, there is also merit in the argument that regional parties in small north eastern states are unlikely to burn their bridges with the BJP (as the ruling party with a command on Union government's resources) despite disagreements over local issues of critical importance. The ethnic strife in Manipur and the military coup in Myanmar are two such issues dominating the poll discourse in Mizoram. For those who care to understand and engage, Mizoram elections are yet another example that political economy in the northeast is very different from the way it is understood in rest of India.

On to Chhattisgarh.

With a three-fourth majority in the 2018 elections, Chhattisgarh is for the Congress to lose. Chhattisgarh, to be sure, is a very diverse state. Two sub-regions in the state, namely Bastar plateau (12 assembly constituencies) and Northern Hills (14 ACs) have a large share of Scheduled Tribe (ST) population while the Chhattisgarh Plains (64 ACs) have a large population of Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The Congress won 11, 14 and 43 ACs in the Bastar, Northern Hills and Chhattisgarh Plains sub-regions in 2018. This number was 1, 5 and 32 in 2008 and 8, 7 and 24 in the 2013 elections. 2013 and 2008 numbers for Chhattisgarh clearly show that the Congress was not very far from the majority mark even in these two elections. What made the traditionally competitive Chhattisgarh — even in 2003 the BJP and Congress had 50 and 37 MLAs, respectively — give a landslide to the Congress in 2018?

Reportage from the 2018 and the ongoing campaign seem to suggest that the Congress's promise of additional bonus in addition to the Minimum Support Price (MSP) on rice procurement was the game changer in the elections. The fact that the BJP has outdone the Congress's existing policy — the BJP has promised procurement of 21 quintal of paddy per acre at 3,100 compared to the Congress government's current policy of procuring 20 quintal per acre at 2,610 — suggests

that it is making amends for the 2018 loss. This is yet another example where the BJP has departed from its principled position of not giving bonus for crop procurements. It remains to be seen whether the Congress outdoes the BJP in procurement prices for paddy when it releases its manifesto. Whatever the final results are, the paddy politics in Chhattisgarh is another proof that asset-based welfare schemes and income transfer policies are complements rather than substitutes in Indian politics.

In Madhya Pradesh, ironical as it sounds, the BJP's biggest challenge is of its own making. In 2018, the Congress managed to finish marginally ahead of the BJP in terms of seats. The latter still had a 0.1 percentage point lead in terms of vote share vis-à-vis the Congress. The BJP derailed the process of creative destruction its state leadership. Had the Congress run the government for five years — it lost power after defections to the BJP in 2020 — the BJP would have had an opportunity to organically develop a new face or reinvent Shivraj Singh Chauhan's appeal, who has been the CM since 2005 barring the 2018-20 period when the Congress was in power. Chauhan could either be gone or look like an opposition leader instead of CM for 18 years.

While the BJP senior leadership, especially the prime minister or the home minister, is yet to endorse Chauhan's claims for the chief minister's post publicly, he himself has been throwing freebies at the problem. Nothing could be a bigger irony than this as Chauhan made a mark in politics as someone who transformed agriculture in his state by adopting a pro-active approach to public investment. Given the fact that agricultural prices are doing better than they were in 2018, the BJP is unlikely to face as much rural anger as it did last time. But, Chauhan's reverse evolution from transforming agriculture to throwing freebies also shows that politics, minus rapid economic transformation cannot always be forward-looking and progressive in its economic outlook. Irrespective of who wins Madhya Pradesh, the state's finances are bound to worsen.

As for Rajasthan, there are many ways to look at this contest. Ashok Gehlot's Congress government has really upped the ante on social welfare and populism. To be fair, it has thrown more than just money at problem by trying to enact laws such as the one for gig economy workers. Should the election results be considered a referendum on these policies and programmes?

The single most important issue will be Gehlot himself. He has successfully fought a factional battle in the state Congress and the unity which is being projected right now seems to have happened on his terms. Even in the

2018 elections, Gehlot fielded rebel candidates and got them to win, many of whom have been given tickets this time. While the Congress high command has accepted Gehlot's supremacy in the state, the BJP still seems to be in a dilemma as far as the question of former chief minister Vasundhara Raje Scindia is concerned. She is not being projected as the chief minister candidate, but has not been completely sidelined, as many of her loyalists have been given party tickets.

The 2023 Rajasthan contest is a fight between the old and the new political order in the state. Gehlot's victory against a BJP without a chief minister face will be yet another validation of the old heavyweights in the state and weaken respective high-commands in both parties. If he loses, the old order within both the BJP and the Congress will be sidelined for good.

And finally, Telangana. If there is one thing which epitomises the Congress's crises in 2014 and 2019 elections, it is its rout in what was undivided Andhra Pradesh. The Congress, under its charismatic leader Y S Rajshekhar Reddy won 29 and 33 out of the 42 Lok Sabha constituencies in undivided Andhra Pradesh in the 2004 and 2009 elections, respectively. This fell to zero in 2014 and three (zero in Andhra Pradesh and three in Telangana) in the 2019 elections. In the 2020 Hyderabad municipal polls, the BJP actually managed to push the Congress to a distant third.

Throughout its history, the Congress has never recovered in a state if it has fallen below the 20% vote share threshold. Almost all reportage from Telangana suggests that the Congress is on a revival path and seems to have regained at least the second position by surging ahead of the BJP. If the Congress manages to wrest Telangana from the Bharat Rashtira Samithi (BRS), it might open a door for the party in Andhra Pradesh too and generate significant tailwinds for its prospects in all of south India. Even if the Congress finishes a close second and significantly ahead of the BJP, it will have enough reason to be happy. However, if the BJP manages to finish ahead of the Congress, it will only add to the latter's difficulties ahead of the 2024 elections.

Is there anything else to the state elections apart from state specific factors? One last point can be made. If the BJP loses a significant vote share — anything below 35% will fall in this category — in the three Hindi belt states, especially Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, it will have reason to worry. This is because, it could be a sign that not just the floating voter, but even its core voters are angry with the party. If that has happened, it will create a doubt whether they will return to ensure a big Lok Sabha victory for the BJP in 2024 like in 2019.

Narrow victories for the Congress, like in 2018, might not mean anything for 2024.

We will be able to answer all this question with greater clarity on December 3.

Every Friday, HT's data and political economy editor, Roshan Kishore, combines his commitment to data and passion for qualitative analysis in a column for HT Premium, Terms of Trade. With a focus on one big number and one big issue, he will go behind the headlines to ask a question and address political economy issues and social puzzles facing contemporary India.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 9-11-2023

Phase 1 turnout in Chhattisgarh up from 2018, but 9 of 20 seats see decline

Jayprakash S Naidu

Voter turnout in the Chhattisgarh Assembly election's first phase is up by 1.53 percentage points to 78% compared to the 2018 polls, the Election Commission (EC) said on Wednesday.

Of the 20 seats that went to polls on Tuesday in the first phase, turnout increased in 11 and **fell in nine seats** compared to the 2018 polls.

Terming the increase in the voter turnout as a "victory of ballot over bullet," the EC said barring two seats of Kondagaon and Bijapur, the voter turnout in each of the remaining 10 seats in Naxal-affected Bastar region increased this time.

Incidentally, out of the nine seats where voter turnout decreased, seven are in the Durg division. Despite the Naxal violence, including the killing of a BJP leader days before the election in Narayanpur, and the killing of a Border Security Force jawan in an IED blast a day before voting in Kanker, the Bastar region saw a better voter turnout.

On the day of voting though, 10 violent incidents involving Naxals were reported, including six firing incidents.

Former state election commissioner Sushil Trivedi said, "The Naxal violence had a small influence on the voting. A major factor for the increase in the voting percentage are multiple public speeches of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Minister Amit Shah as well as Congress leaders. Another important factor... is the 126 new polling booths in interior areas of Bastar."

As per provisional EC figures, the 126 new booths added 68,441 votes. A polling booth in Kallepal, Chitrakot, which was shifted in the 2018 polls over Naxal influence, voter turnout rose to 65.3% this time from 3.68%.

Similarly, new polling booths in Keshkal's Kuea and Bhandarapal, both of which were shifted in 2019 Lok

Sabha elections and saw a 0% turnout, saw 72.41% and 83.68% voter turnout, respectively, this time.

Even in one of the most Naxal-affected seats of Konta, the new polling booths in Mankapal and Karigundam saw turnout rise from 7.61% to 70.02% and 1.98% to 68.22%, respectively.

All security personnel who travelled by road after escorting polling parties by helicopters have returned safely, said Sundarraj P, Inspector General of Police, Bastar Range. On polling day, one COBRA official in Sukma had suffered serious injuries on his leg in an IED blast and four COBRA jawans suffered minor injuries in an encounter in Sukma.

THE HINDU, DELHI 7-11-2023

In Karnataka, a fight for the top post

*The tussle between Siddaramaiah and
D.K. Shivakumar persists*

Nagesh Prabhu

With both leaders vying for power, the Congress high command, especially Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, prevailed upon them to work together to ensure smooth government formation as well as the rolling out of the party's five guarantee schemes. However, there has been turbulence every now and then, largely owing to the varying political backgrounds, leadership styles, ambitions, and ideological approaches of the two leaders.

Though Mr. Siddaramaiah and Mr. Shivakumar sought to give the impression that there is no political one-upmanship, their staunch supporters have been openly airing their differences. The omission of senior party leader B.K. Hariprasad from the Cabinet and the alleged side-lining of a section of Cabinet ministers in making key decisions have caused resentment. Some ministers alleged a lack of acknowledgement for their contributions in the party's spectacular victory in the 2023 Assembly elections. Even as Mr. Shivakumar is biding his time, ministers Satish Jarkiholi and G. Parameshwara have also been nursing their ambition to occupy the coveted top post.

In order to ensure equal distribution of powers, Cooperation Minister K.N. Rajanna mooted a proposal before the high command to appoint three more Deputy Chief Ministers for "balancing castes" ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. This proposal is seen as a bid by the Siddaramaiah camp to checkmate Mr. Shivakumar, who is seen to be taking decisions related to Bengaluru, which is key to the State's economic growth, with little consultation.

Mr. Shivakumar's "unilateral" proposal to rename Ramanagara district, abutting the State capital, as Bengaluru South has not gone down well with the Chief

Minister. Mr. Siddaramaiah distanced himself from it saying, "I will discuss it with him. As he has not discussed the matter, I don't know what is on his mind."

The proposal was made with the intent of developing real estate, and drew flak from many quarters, especially Janata Dal (S) leader H.D. Kumaraswamy, who had carved out Ramanagara district from Bengaluru Rural in 2007 when he was Chief Minister.

Amid all this brouhaha, delays in the appointment of party workers and legislators to 80-odd government boards/corporations, out-of-turn remarks by ministers and party MLAs on the tenure of the Chief Minister and other issues, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s allegations of corruption in the government do not augur well for Congress ahead of the general elections.

In a damage control exercise, AICC general secretaries Randeep Singh Surjewala and K.C. Venugopal huddled with Mr. Siddaramaiah and Mr. Shivakumar last week in Bengaluru, to pacify them. The leaders also cautioned ministers and legislators not to cross the 'Lakshman Rekha' of the party. They warned that "appropriate action" would be taken against those making public statements on internal party matters and the government.

The BJP, which has mastered the art of engineered defections ('Operation Lotus'), first in 2008 and then in 2019 in Karnataka, has adopted a wait-and-watch policy. Mr. Shivakumar and others in the Congress have claimed that there is "a big conspiracy" to topple the government.

In an attempt to send a clear message to the Congress cadre that 'all is well' in the government, Mr. Siddaramaiah recently held a breakfast meeting with his cabinet colleagues, including Mr. Shivakumar, and instructed them to work hard to ensure victory in at least 20 out of 28 seats in the 2024 general elections. While this is an apparent compromise bid, the game of one-upmanship between the top leaders is clearly not over. It is anybody's guess when it might get intense again.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 15-11-2023

MP polls: BJP hits top gear with serial Modi rallies in swing region

Chouhan launches voter slip distribution drive

Aditi Tandon

New Delhi, The ruling BJP on Tuesday hit top gear in poll bound Madhya Pradesh with Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing rallies in the swing region of Malwa-Nimar and Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan launching a voter slip distribution drive in Bhopal.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a road show in the Indore district of Malwa where it currently holds four of the seven assembly segments.

BJP's general secretary Kailash Vijayvargiya is contesting from Indore 1, where sitting Congress MLA Sanjay Shukla is putting up a spirited fight against the saffron veteran who has never lost an election.

"This election is meant to accelerate the development of Madhya Pradesh with the double engine speed. It is about providing new opportunities to youth and women. It is about keeping the Congress hand of loot and corruption away from Madhya Pradesh. You must remember- Congress knows only how to usurp, not how to give. Congress Aayi, Tabahi Layi," Prime Minister said at rallies in Bhopal's Betul, and Malwa-Nimar's Shajapur and Jhabua.

Modi predicted massive voter mobilization around the BJP this season and said "people will create history by coming out of their homes to vote."

"Only today we received a report from the state that Congress has accepted defeat and now they're relying on luck. Congress can care only for one family and their children whereas the BJP thinks about all your children," the PM said, attacking Congress and its leadership as "self serving and pessimistic about India's growth story."

Importantly, the BJP is banking on higher voter turnout in the swing region of Malwa-Nimar which houses 15 districts with the largest number of 66 constituencies among six regions of the state.

While the Congress had won 35 of these 66 in the 2018 polls, the BJP was confined to 28.

The region includes Indore's 7 districts, and Jhabua and Shajapur three each.

In 2013, Malwa-Nimar had propelled the BJP to victory in the state with the party bagging 57 seats.

BJP suffered losses in this region in 2018 on account of farmers' unrest in Mandsaur.

The BJP this time hopes its promise of enhanced MSP on wheat (Rs 2,700 per quintal) and paddy (Rs 3,100 a quintal) will help sway farmers in its favour though the Congress promise of a farm loan waiver also remains an equally dominant sop.

Importantly for BJP, Malwa-Nimar, where the PM held two rallies ahead of November 17 polls, is home to 17 seats which the Congress has not won for over three decades.

These seats include Indore 2 (with BJP since 1993); Indore 4 (with BJP since 1990s); Indore 5 (with BJP since 2003); Dhar (with BJP for 20 years) and Ujjain South and North.

Congress senior MLA Jeetu Patwari is contesting from Rau, a segment in Indore district and Vikrant Bhuria,

the son of former union minister Kanti Lal Bhuria is fighting his maiden poll from Jhabua in Malwa-Nimar.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 14-11-2023

Assembly election: Congress takes on BJP on welfare agenda, BSP and Samajwadi Party make presence felt

'Modiji came here a few days ago and said he opened 500 factories. He had earlier promised to put Rs 15 lakh in every account. Now he says 500 factories set up. Has anybody seen these factories?'

Sanjay K. Jha, Bhopal

As the BJP quietly sheds its contempt for "revdi culture" and embraces "Modi's guarantee" to match the Congress party's welfare agenda, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi are out on the poll trail trying to convince people that they should trust leaders only after checking their track record.

Amidst the sharpening poll rhetoric, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) to have sprung up in pockets, threatening to fragment the vote shares of the two main players. Observers believe, though, that their impact will remain marginal.

Priyanka has been telling voters to see whether the Congress fulfilled its guarantees in Karnataka, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh or not. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul have constantly explained how Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not fulfill promises made over the last 10 years.

Modi also tried to tell the people in different public meetings in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh that the Congress cannot be trusted on its promises. He said: "*Ek taraf Congress ki jhooth ki dukan hai, to dusri taraf Modi ki guarantee hai* (On one side is Congress party's shop of lies and on the other side is Modi's guarantee)." Talking about the free foodgrain distribution, he said the poor will continue getting "*muft ka chana-chaawal*" as long as Modi is at the helm.

Campaigning at Neemuch in Madhya Pradesh on Monday, Rahul chose to strike at Modi's credentials, arguing that he was accustomed to making false promises. Rahul said: "Modiji came here a few days ago and said he opened 500 factories. He had earlier promised to put Rs 15 lakh in every account. Now he says 500 factories set up. Has anybody seen these factories?" The crowd sang in chorus: "No!"

Rahul then repeatedly said: "*Koi sharm nahin hai. Zero shame. No shame at all.*"

The Prime Minister had addressed a rally in Neemuch three days ago and claimed more than 500 industries had been opened and promised to make Neemuch a leading industrial economy. Rahul grabbed this

opportunity to rub the message in that the Prime Minister's words meant nothing. He asserted that the Congress was going to sweep the election in Madhya Pradesh.

While the Congress does appear to have an edge in most parts of the state, there are no indications of a sweep as the ruling BJP has a broad support base, setting up tough contests in a large number of constituencies. Madhya Pradesh is a direct fight between the BJP and the Congress but smaller parties can play a critical role in a fiercely contested election, as manifested so vividly in the 2018 election.

What has happened in the state for the first time is the coalition of two parties representing the interest of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes — the BSP and the Gondwana Gantantra Party (GGP). There are 35 seats reserved for SCs and 47 reserved for STs out of the total 230 seats. While the BSP has substantial influence in Gwalior-Chambal belt, areas neighbouring Uttar Pradesh, the GGP is active in Balaghat, Mandla, Dindori, Seoni, Chhindwara and Betul.

Though the BSP won only two seats in the last election, it had 5 per cent vote which can turn critical in a tight contest. In 2018, the Congress had won 114 seats with 40.89 per cent of the vote while the BJP was close behind with 109 seats and a larger share of 41.02 per cent vote. Even a minor swing can change political fortunes and the BSP is likely to increase its vote-share this time in alliance with the Gondwana party, which has traditionally cornered around 2 per cent vote.

The BSP is contesting 178 seats and the GGP has fielded candidates in 52 constituencies. While it is difficult to guess how many of these candidates are in a winning position, this unique combine of SC-ST parties may slice away substantial number of votes in over dozen seats which where a three-corner contest has developed.

While these parties cut both ways, harming both the BJP and the Congress, the division of anti-incumbency vote is bound to help the ruling party. Among the reserved seats, the Congress had won 47 and the BJP 34 last time, which means the Congress has to protect a much bigger area from the BSP-GGP than the BJP. Many strong Congress and BJP rebels are contesting on BSP-GGP tickets. While the Congress has 37 rebel candidates, the BJP has 35.

Confounding the confusion, even the Samajwadi Party has fielded over 70 candidates and the Aam Aadmi Party is contesting 66 constituencies. Both these parties have taken a strident anti-BJP position and will largely cut into anti-incumbency vote-bank. The Congress would expect these parties to support it in case of a

shortfall in Assembly numbers but how much damage they will inflict as vote-cutters remains moot.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 13-11-2023

Mizoram assembly election: Female voter turnout of 81.25% exceeds male turnout

ANI

Overall, 80.66 per cent of the total 8.52 lakh voters of the state exercised their franchise to decide the electoral fate of 174 candidates.

Female voter turnout has been recorded higher than male voters in the Mizoram assembly election which was held on November 7. According to the Chief Electoral Officer Office, Mizoram, 81.25 per cent of female voters have been recorded while male voters are recorded at 80.04 per cent.

Overall, 80.66 per cent of the total 8.52 lakh voters of the state exercised their franchise to decide the electoral fate of 174 candidates.

Among all 11 districts of the state, Serchhip district has recorded the highest 84.78 per cent voter turnout followed by Mamit district with 84.65 per cent, Hnahthial district with 84.19 per cent, and Lunglei district with 83.68 per cent.

In other districts of the state, 82.95 per cent of voter turnout out recorded in the Kolasib district, 82.40 per cent in the Khawzawl district, 80.80 per cent in the Saitual district, 80.58 per cent in Lawngtlai district, 79.92 per cent in the Champhai district, 77.83 per cent in Aizawl district and 77.03 per cent in Siaha district.

On the other hand, 88.19 per cent voter turnout out recorded in the Thorang assembly constituency in Lunglei district while 87.32 per cent voter turnout out recorded in the Tuikum assembly constituency in Serchhip district and West Tuipui constituency in Lunglei district.

In these elections, the Mizo National Front led by Chief Minister Zoramthanga faces a two-pronged challenge in the form of a six party alliance the Zoram Peoples Movement (ZPM) and the Congress as it attempts to hold on to power.

The results for the 40 member Mizoram assembly will be declared on December 3 along with four other states that are going to the polls.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 14-11-2023

Polls schedule to be unveiled Nov 15 or 16 EC to sit soon to make the final decision

Mohiuddin Alamgir

The Election Commission is likely to announce the schedule of the next polls either on November 15 or 16.

The commission will make the final decision to this end in a meeting, the date for which is yet to be fixed.

"The commission said the schedule will be announced in the first half of this month and there is still time for the first half to end. Wait until then," Jahangir Alam, EC secretary and spokesperson, said in reply to a query.

The announcement of the schedule comes amid an ongoing political turmoil.

Following law enforcers' clashes with BNP activists on October 28, BNP, Jamaat, and several other like-minded parties enforced a hartal and several The rounds of blockades.

The ruling Awami League and the BNP have been sticking to their guns on the election-time government.

The BNP wants a caretaker government to oversee the election and reconstitution of the EC, while the AL says the election will be held under the current government as per the constitution.

As part of the preparation for the schedule announcement, the commission met President Mohammed Shahabuddin on November 9. It also held meetings with Chief Justice Obaidul Hassan and the heads of the law enforcement agencies and ministries.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 8-11-2023

US monitors poll environ in BD amid political unrest

Diplomatic Correspondent

The United States continues to closely monitor the electoral environment in Bangladesh leading up to the January election, and it takes any incidents of violence "incredibly seriously," the US State Department Spokesperson Vedant Patel said.

"The United States is engaging with the government, opposition leaders, civil society, and other stakeholders in Bangla-desh to urge them to work together," Patel said during a press briefing in Washington on Monday.

"The US does not support any political party in Bangladesh. We don't favor any one political party over the other," Patel said.

"Right now, our focus continues to be closely monitoring the electoral environment in Bangladesh leading up to January's election, engaging appropriately with the government, opposition leaders, civil society, and other stakeholders to urge them to work together for the benefit of the Bangladeshi people," he added.

Patel made these comments while replying to a question related to the issue of the BNP's countrywide blockades and political violence in Bangladesh ahead of the national polls at the press briefing.

Responding to another question, the principal deputy spokesperson for the US Department of State said they have an "incredibly talented" team at the embassy in

Dhaka, led by an experienced ambassador who is well-versed not just in working in Bangladesh but also in the broader region.

On October 8, a joint International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) mission arrived in Dhaka.

Meanwhile, from October 8 to 12, the six-member mission held meetings with a diverse group of election stakeholders, including government officials, political party leaders, election authorities, civil society, and others, with a view to assessing the pre-election situation in Bangladesh.

During its meeting with the Election Commission on October 10th, the mission stressed the importance of holding free, fair, participatory, and peaceful polls in Bangladesh.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 3-11-2023

No possibility of dialogue with terrorist party BNP: Quader

Staff Correspondent

Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader, also Road Transport and Bridges Minister, on Thursday rejected any possibility of holding dialogue with BNP terming it as a terrorist party.

"BNP has already proven that it is a terrorist party. Dialogue cannot be held with such a terrorist party. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina earlier stated that and now I am also repeating it," he said while replying to a question on political issues at a press conference held in his Ministry at the Secretariat in Dhaka.

The press conference was arranged to brief media about the inauguration of Metro-Rail from Agargaon to Motijheel portion scheduled to be launched on Saturday (November 4).

About the upcoming national elections, he said following the constitutional provision, polls will be held within 90 days before January 24 when the government's tenure will end. The Election Commission will announce the date as it's the jurisdiction of the constitutional institution.

About the United Nations statement over Bangladesh, the Minister said in reality the world forum cannot play effective role in humanitarian crisis in Gaza and Sudan which are their major responsibilities. So, the UN has no time to pay heed to Bangladesh.

Quader said, "The UN has been misled in the statement. We want to say that this is not the right time for the United Nations to pay heed to Bangladesh."

"Sudan is being divided into two parts. What is happening in Palestine? Is anyone listening to what the UN says about Gaza? The United Nations is only in the name, it has no function in reality, said Quader.

"An incident has happened here regarding the election of Bangladesh. Different kinds of information can be passed on. But it does not harm the UN. In reality, the world forum cannot play an effective role in the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and Sudan which are their major responsibilities," he added.

Quader pointed out that the United Nations has no other role in the world except to say some good words.

"The climate situation is worsening. The Secretary General of the United Nations sometimes speaks sweetly in beautiful language. We don't know that they have any role other than to say good words. They are worried about Bangladesh, but we are doing very well," he said.

When asked whether the country is moving towards another election without the BNP, he said, "I don't know. BNP has the right to join the elections. If they don't participate in the election, it's up to them."

My point is that the constitution of Bangladesh is not changing. Our election, our democracy will continue as per the constitution. It doesn't matter who comes or who doesn't come," the AL leader said.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 15-11-2023

154 arson attacks in 17 days of strikes, blockades called by BNP-Jamaat

Staff Correspondent

After analysing the data collected from across the entire country, the Fire Service and Civil Defence said that 25 of the 64 districts had experienced arson attacks where different structures and vehicles were set ablaze. No such incidents were reported in the remaining 39 districts.

The highest number of arson attacks took place in Dhaka and none were reported in the Sylhet Division, the Fire Service said in a statement on Tuesday. Gazipur reported the second highest cases of arson attacks, with most of them taking place at night.

In some places, Awami League and BNP offices, ward councillor offices, electricity offices and bus ticket counters were set ablaze. The arsonists set fire to buses, trucks, private cars, microbuses, covered vans, ambulances, autorickshaws, and even a Fire Service water tanker.

Most of the arson attacks occurred at night, particularly between 6:00 pm and 6:00am, according to the Fire Service.

As many as 61 arson attacks occurred during daytime and 93 at night from October 28 to November 13, it said.

The current violence across the country started on October 28, when the BNP held a major rally in Dhaka

to oust the government and establish a neutral election-time caretaker government.

The event was marred by deadly clashes with the police, leading the opposition group to enforce a hartal on October 29.

They subsequently enforced a nationwide blockade from October 31 to November 2, with a one-day break. At the end of the shutdown, another 48-hour blockade was announced for November 5 and November 6, and then for November 8 and November 9. With a day of respite, the BNP again announced a 48-hour blockade on November 12 and November 13.

The party has currently called another 48-hour blockade, which will be enforced on Wednesday and Thursday. This will be the fifth time they called for a blockade.

On average, more than nine arson attacks have been reported across the country every day between October 28 and November 13, Fire Service and Civil Defence said on Tuesday.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 15-11-2023

Calls mount for political dialogue

Since our major political parties have locked their horns over the issue of how the upcoming national election would take place, there have been palpable efforts from both home and abroad to bring them to the table to reach an understanding as a means of concessions and compromises.

The US has once again called for a dialogue among the squabbling political parties. Conveying this missive, the US government on Monday dispatched letters to the ruling party, Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and Jatiya Party, urging them to sit for negotiations to bury the hatchet without any preconditions in order to hold a free, fair and peaceful election.

These letters sent by the US Assistant Secretary at the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu were handed over by US Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Haas who has long been stressing a meaningful dialogue among our political parties.

The latest US call for a dialogue came coinciding with the imminent announcement of the election schedule most likely on Wednesday (today). This is a crucial time to create a level-playing field for the election which is supposed to take place early January.

With election schedule closing in, opposition political parties led by BNP have stuck to its one-point demand for a neutral government during the election period which ruling party turned down describing it as unconstitutional.

This is why opposition parties have indulged in unwanted and anti-people events like hartal and blockades that have threatened the country's political situation to spin out of peaceful atmosphere for staging a violence-free national election.

As part of their series of violent political programmes, BNP and its allies called for the fifth country-wide blockade on Wednesday. Their violent activities have already claimed lives of at least a dozen people and damaged over 80 different types of vehicles like buses, trucks, pick-up vans which were set afire during agitation.

As violence begets violence, destructive activities by the opposition parties will not really find a solution to their disagreements with the government. Leading parties including Awami League need to sit together to discuss their dissonances by setting aside their rivalries and political vendettas.

For this, a comprehensive and meaningful dialogue between political parties is essential at the moment before it is too late. Civil society, intellectual groups and foreign powers have long been advocating for it, but to no avail.

For an inclusive election, we believe that there is no alternative to dialogue between our political parties on the issue of election. This is time for our political parties to sink their differences with flexible mentality for compromises.

We are in belief that our political parties mainly Awami League will not let us down by desisting from organizing a dialogue in order to stage an election acceptable to all.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 13-11-2023

JP shifting stance on polls-time govt

Many of its MPs pressing top leaders to join election under Hasina-led govt

Rashidul Hasan

The Jatiya Party appears to have softened its tough stance against elections under the ruling Awami League. JP Chairman GM Quader used to say that with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in power, the next national election cannot be free and fair.

He also used to say that there should be a system in which the government cannot influence or control polling.

That's why GM Quader's November 5 comment that his party was cooperating with the election process came as a surprise to many.

The JP is making preparations to participate in the election, he said, adding that if the party decides otherwise, it will make an announcement.

JP insiders say many of their MPs and leaders want to participate in the election.

On several occasions in recent weeks, Raushan Ershad, chief patron of the party, said JP will participate in the next election held under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

In the last one and a half months, GM Quader has not made any harsh criticism of the PM in his statements sent to the media.

JP Secretary General Mujibul Haque Chunnu told this correspondent on November 6 that his party would participate in the election under Hasina if it is held in a free and fair manner.

JP insiders said Quader apparently softened his anti-government stance after his visit to India in late August. A top JP leader said, 17 of the party's 27 MPs had met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Jatiya Sangsad on November 1.

A JP leader present at the meeting said the political situation and the next election were discussed at the informal meeting.

JP Chairman Quader said he was not aware of the meeting. However, Chunnu said he was aware of it.

"It was a courtesy call. But I didn't participate because of some technicalities," Chunnu said, adding that the JP was making preparations to participate in all 300 constituencies.

Asked whether the party will form an electoral alliance with the AL or participate independently, Chunnu said it would depend on the situation.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 3-11-2023

Increased powers for Presidential Commission on electoral reforms

Public allowed to make representations

The Gazette notification increasing the powers of the Presidential Commission appointed under the Chairmanship of former Chief Justice Priyasad Dep to find out how to reform the electoral system in this country is scheduled to be published today.

President's Secretary Saman Ekanayake will publish this gazette notification on the instructions of President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

A senior government Minister stated that anyone can go before this Commission and comment on how the election system should be reformed.

He further said that all Parties including civil organizations, trade unions, journalists can go before this Commission and present their facts.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 9-11-2023
United National Party's Promising
Future Under President Ranil
Wickremesinghe

Chandra Edirisuriya

Sri Lanka is not unique in adopting the Executive Presidential System. The best example is the United States of America, which over 200 years ago, after winning the Independence War with Britain, adopted this system and became the world's most powerful and wealthy nation. France did so in 1958, thus ending the era of a succession of unstable governments, and is now one of the most powerful European nations. There are many more, said President J.R. Jayewardene, after his retirement, delivering a lecture to the Law Students' Sinhala Union at the Sri Lanka Law College, in 1993.

Sri Lanka, too, achieved much success after adopting the Executive Presidential System in 1978. The open economy was ushered in removing the shackles under the closed economy from 1970 to 1977. Investment Promotion Zones were opened bringing in foreign investment.

The thirty-year Mahaweli scheme was completed in six years bringing much new land under cultivation thus increasing the production of paddy, subsidiary crops vegetables and fruits both for local consumption and export.

Open Economy

A number of reservoirs constructed under the Mahaweli scheme also generate hydroelectricity thus contributing much power to the national grid thus saving on fuel, particularly at a time of high oil prices, such as the present.

Development under the open economy was possible because of efficient management by J.R. Jayewardene and his Ministers which unfortunately was marred by LTTE terrorism that raised its head, especially after 1983.

The rate of economic growth which was over 6% in 1978 dropped to less than 2% in 1986. Thereafter, following a period of fluctuation, it dropped to an all-time low of minus 2% in 2001 which was put right by then Premier Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The rate of economic growth rose thereafter, coming down merely to a near 4% in 2007 to rise dramatically to over 8% after the end of the war with the LTTE in 2009.

Quite pathetically the opportunity for economic revival was wasted because of overall mismanagement.

It is an irony of fate that it fell this time, too, on President Ranil Wickremesinghe also as Premier and Finance Minister, too, earlier, to retrieve the country

from bankruptcy and it is unkind to think of it as merely taking chestnuts out of the fire.

Bumper Harvest

Among the positive achievements of President Ranil Wickremesinghe is the gift of fertilizer from the United States Government which led to a bumper harvest that has assisted in ensuring stability.

Hot on the heels of taking steps to modernize agriculture which is the mainstay of the economy President Ranil Wickremesinghe has taken immediate steps to revive Mahaweli Zones A and B around Trincomalee that had been abandoned due to the terrorist war and never thought of later.

Mannar is to be developed as a tourist hub emphasizing sea tourism. The potential for fisheries there is also to be exploited.

In addition, the United National Party (UNP) which has had a rich past during its nearly eight decades of existence is being brought back to its former glory.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe is the most fitting successor to President J.R. Jayewardene.

Its founder leader D.S. Senanayake was a conservative with a coterie of national leaders such as S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, J.R. Jayewardene, Sir John Kotelawala, Sir Lalitha Rajapakse, Sir Edwin Wijeyaratne, Dudley Senanayake and others around him.

Men of Sterling Character

The provincial leaders with a very strong voter base were P.B. Bulankulama Disave, Maithripala Senanayake, E.L.B. Hurulle, Sir Claude Corea, A. Ratnayake, A.E. Nugawela, E.L. Senanayake, Capt. C.P.J. Seneviratne, Sir Leo Fernando, D.M. Rajapaksa, D.A. Rajapaksa, H.W. Amarasinghe and many others.

All leaders of the United National Party, whether national or provincial, were men of sterling character. So, although corrupt politicians could enter other parties to escape punishment they are not entertained by the UNP.

President J.R. Jayewardene gifting an elephant calf to his contemporary United States President Ronald Reagan was very appropriate as the election symbol of both Grand Old Party of America (GOP) the Republican Party and UNP is the Elephant.

Dudley Senanayake and Sir John Kotelawala, like other young men of wealthy families from around the world, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, imbibed socialist ideas, at Cambridge University, studying the sciences that are involved in the study of the physical world and its phenomena including biology, physics, chemistry and geology for the Natural Science Tripos.

The old leftists in time began to think that the 'devil was not so black' and the tragedy of the 1952 August Hartal was the turning point. They joined S.W.R.D.

Bandaranaike in 1956 but the political confusion that ensued ended only with the promulgation of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka in 1978 by J.R. Jayewardene.

Energetic General Secretary of the United National Party Palitha Range Bandara has seen to it that office bearers have been appointed to almost all the 170 electoral committees of the party.

Meanwhile, Field Marshall Sarath Fonseka saying he attended the National Day Celebrations of this year held under President Ranil Wickremesinghe's aegis, as he has no issue with him, augurs well for the United National Party.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 10-11-2023

Provinces against centre

Kathmandu should refrain from encroaching on the jurisdiction of subnational governments.

This story has been told many times over the past few years—yet it is worth repeating. For it goes to the heart of Nepal's democratic process. It has been eight years since Nepal adopted federalism, but certain state apparatuses at the federal level still fail to acknowledge it. The reluctance on the part of the authorities to honour the spirit of federalism

has hindered the devolution of power to the provinces as required by the 2015 Constitution of Nepal. A case in point is the frustration expressed by the Madhesh Province government, which has been asking the federal government to expedite adjusting the police force. Without a force of its own, the provincial government cannot maintain law and order in its jurisdiction, a serious security concern that the federal government fails to acknowledge. The provincial government has now given the federal government a 30-day ultimatum to adjust the police force as mandated by the constitution.

The hesitation to let go of the unitary police force is not the only anti-federal federal government act. The provincial governments have also failed to set up civil services. Again, the constitution requires the federal, provincial and local governments to have their own civil services. But the dilly-dallying by the federal government in getting a Civil Service Act passed is keeping the provincial civil services in limbo. This delay has resulted in the provinces' failure to recruit thousands of required employees. The absence of a federal civil service law despite over 50 percent of the workload being devolved to the subnational levels lays bare the hypocrisy of the politicians at the federal level, many of them vocal advocates of federalism. Moreover, it has created a disbalance considering how government employees at the federal level have been without duties

while the subnational governments struggle to get the work done.

Federalism cannot be strengthened without a judicious devolution of power and the strengthening of subnational governments. However, the government continues to delay enacting the required laws on one or the other pretext. Apart from the delays, there have been several complaints against the federal government for its stepping on the jurisdiction of the provincial governments. The Bagmati Province last month filed a petition at the Supreme Court arguing that the centre had overstepped its authority in transport management. The provincial government alleged that the Urban Area Public Transport (Management) Authority Act, promulgated by the federal parliament last year, allowed the federal government to set up an authority to manage public transport in three districts of the federal capital. This, the petition said, was against the spirit of federalism, as transport management is an explicit jurisdiction of the provinces under the new constitution. Likewise, the Madhesh Province had earlier filed six petitions against the federal government, alleging an obstruction in exercising its constitutional authority.

The devolution of power in federal Nepal cannot remain on the backburner anymore. Those holding the key to power at the centre should recognise the concurrent and exclusive rights of the subnational governments and refrain from encroaching on their jurisdictions. As the provinces evolve and become ever-more confident, they are expected to look to protect their jurisdictions with more determination, and the centre's reluctance to recognise their agency will beget more confrontation in the coming days.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 14-11-2023

Border guard killed in clashes with terrorist group southeast of Iran

TEHRAN – Terrorists have opened fire on border guards in the Southeastern city of Saravan in the Sistan and Baluchestan Province, killing one soldier and wounding two others.

"The general condition of the wounded is reported to be favorable, and the current situation in the region is calm," said Saravan's governor Saeed Tajalli, adding that the attack occurred Wednesday morning.

The border guard who was killed was identified as Mehdi Nouri Afshar. The governor said anti-Iranian elements carried out the attack by targeting a patrol car carrying four soldiers. He did not elaborate on what entity the terrorists belonged to.

Meanwhile, the Iranian judiciary and intelligence forces have initiated new measures to ensure security in the Sistan and Baluchestan province.

The chief prosecutor of the province on Monday announced that three individuals who had plotted and carried out terrorist attacks in the city of Zahedan have been executed.

“The court sentenced the defendants to membership in the Jundallah terrorist group, corruption on earth through participation in terrorist acts, explosion of 2 bombs at a police station in Zahedan in 2018, participation in a terrorist act by exploding a bomb on the route of a passing police car in 2019, as well as smuggling of weapons,” explained Ali Mostafavi Niya.

Another top judiciary official has also declared the dismantlement of a large smuggling network which was trying to supply weapons to terrorists through Iran’s eastern and southern borders.

“Smugglers were bringing a shipment of weapons into the country from the eastern borders and southern borders and intended to distribute it in the central provinces of the country,” the official said.

At least 36 weapons were confiscated from the group. Iranian authorities have announced the discovery and confiscation of several shipments of weapons and ammunition in recent months.

- MHA

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 14-11-2023

Elections around the corner

By Khalid Bhatti

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has announced it will hold elections on February 8, 2024. The ECP is likely to announce the election schedule after the completion of the delimitation process in the first week of December.

People from the working class and other sections of society have many questions regarding the upcoming elections. They want to know if there will be a stable and strong government after the elections or whether we are heading for another hung parliament and a weak government.

It is too early to predict the outcome of the elections. At this stage, it can be safely said that the PML-N seems in an advantageous position compared to the PTI and the PPP. But at this stage, it is difficult to predict how many seats the PML-N is going to win. The situation will become clear in the next few weeks.

Will the elections end political instability and chaos in the country? Will the PTI be allowed to contest elections or be kept out of the electoral process? Will the new government succeed to bring down soaring inflation, high unemployment and rising poverty?

One will have to wait for election results to get some answers. But political parties through their programmes, manifestos and narratives can answer some of the questions and concerns. People are more concerned how the political leadership will fix the economy and introduce necessary reforms; they want to know how political parties are going to solve their problems and raise their standard of living.

Pakistan needs a strong and stable government to address the fundamental problems faced by the economy; it cannot afford to hold another controversial election. One hopes that the 2024 general elections will bring much-needed political stability in the country. A free, fair and transparent election is needed to end political instability and uncertainty.

Pakistan needs an election which clearly reflects the will of the Pakistani people. Concrete steps and measures should be taken to dispel the impression that election results in Pakistan reflect the will of the powers that be, not the will of the people. Election results must reflect the aspirations and preferences of the general public.

A controversial election like the one in 2018 will not help end political polarization, instability and confrontation. Pakistan not only needs an election but an election that nobody can point a finger at. We need free, fair and transparent elections – without any interference, and without pre-poll rigging, political engineering and manipulation.

This kind of election might help overcome political confrontation and polarization. But if the election results become controversial and the losing party refuses to accept defeat, more confrontation and instability will follow.

Political parties including the PPP and the PTI are already demanding a level playing field. The PTI is complaining that it is not being allowed to organize political activities. Without addressing the concerns and complaints of different political parties, we are heading towards another controversial general election – which is not going to bring political stability in the country.

At present, political parties are gearing up for election campaigns. Meetings are taking place between political

leaders to form alliances and make seat adjustments. Political activities at the moment are concentrated around winning the maximum number of electables. 'Drawing room' political activities are taking place, and ordinary people have nothing to do with them.

There is no enthusiasm among people regarding the election. No political party has announced its manifesto so far. It seems that leaders are not interested in coming up with solutions to the problems faced by the people of Pakistan.

To generate interest in elections and instil hope in people, leaders need to address the main issues including poverty, inflation and unemployment; they need to fully grasp the gravity of the situation. When one talks to people on the streets, at tea stalls, in marriage halls or in the public transport, many people are openly saying that they are no longer interested in participating in the upcoming elections. Power politics has discouraged many working-class voters. Unprincipled and ideology-less politics has disappointed the big sections of the population.

Political leaders and the ruling elite are not willing to undertake the reforms required to stabilize the economy and improve governance. They are not fully realizing that people are not happy with the economic situation. We have come to a point where a majority of the population has lost the hope that elections will improve their lives and a new government will work for their betterment, bringing improvements in their miserable lives.

There is a general feeling among sections of the population that all mainstream parties are the same and hardly offer anything to the poor. The economic performance and overall governance of the PTI government (44 months) and the PDM coalition government (16 months) in the last five years has disappointed many people. No serious effort was made to reform the police, state structure, criminal justice system and economy. This approach needs to be changed.

The Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) has compared the 2018 manifestos presented by the three mainstream parties – the PML-N, PPP and PTI. The results are shocking. Only 20 per cent of the issues faced by the economy and people were addressed in their manifestos. Twelve per cent of these issues find space in the PML-N manifesto, 7.0 per cent in the PPP manifesto and 1.5 per cent in the PTI's.

The aim was to evaluate whether these manifestoes have any substance and concrete plan or whether they were packed with hollow promises and sweeping statements, without any homework for the future. This casual approach towards party programmes and manifestos needs to be changed.

The writer is a freelance journalist.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 14-11-2023

Not posting retired officers as DROs, ROs: ECP

ECP Media Coordination and Outreach Wing, in statement, maintained commission is yet to take any such decision

By Mumtaz Alvi

ISLAMABAD: The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) Monday vehemently declared all reports regarding appointment of retired officers as District Returning Officers (DROs) and Returning Officers (ROs) as baseless and contrary to the facts.

The ECP Media Coordination and Outreach Wing, in a statement, maintained that the commission is yet to take any such decision.

"All media reports regarding the appointment of District Returning Officers/ Returning Officers are baseless and contrary to the facts. The media ran misleading news about the appointment of retired officers as District Returning Officers/ Returning Officers. The commission is yet to take any such decision," the ECP spokesperson said.

He explained the ECP has repeatedly written letters to the Provincial Election Commissioners for lists for appointment of District Returning Officers/Returning Officers so that updated lists can be prepared. This is an ongoing process in which the ECP considers the appointment of DROs and ROs very important to ensure free, fair and impartial general elections.

"It is being looked at from different angles so that the general elections are fair and transparent. The Election Commission is well aware of all its constitutional responsibilities," the Election Commission said.

PTI Secretary General Omar Ayub, through a message on his social media account, X, had alleged that the Election Commission was appointing retired officers for pre-poll rigging.

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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 10-11-2023**Moody's retains India's 2023 growth forecast at 6.7 per cent; domestic demand to support near-term growth**

September eased to 5 per cent from 6.8 per cent in the month prior, dropping back within the RBI's target range

PTI

New Delhi, Moody's Investors Service on Thursday retained India's economic growth forecast for 2023 at 6.7 per cent and said strong domestic demand will likely sustain the growth in the near term.

With exports remaining weak against an unfavourable global economic backdrop, Moody's in its Global Macroeconomic Outlook 2024-25 said sustained domestic demand growth is propelling India's economy.

"We expect India's real GDP to grow about 6.7 per cent in 2023, 6.1 per cent in 2024 and 6.3 per cent in 2025," Moody's said.

India's real GDP rose 7.8 per cent year-over-year in June quarter, up from 6.1 per cent in March quarter and bolstered by a 6 per cent increase in household consumption and solid capital expenditure and service sector activity.

India's growth momentum remains strong and we expect the economy to grow 6.7 per cent in 2023, as it did in 2022, it said.

Moody's said high-frequency indicators show that the economy's strong June quarter momentum carried into July-September as well.

"Robust goods and services tax collections, surging auto sales, rising consumer optimism and double-digit credit growth suggest urban consumption demand will likely remain resilient amid the ongoing festive season.

However, rural demand, which has shown nascent signs of improvement, remains vulnerable to uneven monsoons that could lower crop yields and farm income," Moody's said.

On supply side, expanding manufacturing and services PMIs and healthy core industries' output growth add to evidence of solid economic momentum, it said.

"With exports remaining weak amid an unfavourable global economic backdrop, strong domestic demand will likely sustain growth in the near term. Domestic demand dynamics beyond the festive season will depend on the trajectory of inflation and the lagged impact of the RBI's monetary policy tightening," it said.

Headline inflation in September eased to 5 per cent from 6.8 per cent in the month prior, dropping back within the RBI's target range.

Although core inflation also moderated to 4.5 per cent, from 4.8 per cent in August, upside risks to headline CPI from potential spikes in food and energy prices amid erratic weather and geopolitical uncertainty will keep the RBI vigilant, Moody's said.

The RBI held the repo rate steady at 6.5 per cent for the fourth consecutive meeting in October, and with the central bank reiterating that the inflation target is 4 per cent and not 2-6 per cent at its October meeting, sub-6 per cent inflation prints will likely not suffice as conditions for easing its monetary policy stance, Moody's said.

With regard to global growth, Moody's said it will slow in 2024 as high interest rates percolate through credit channels to the real economy.

Inflation will continue to cool amid slowing demand in 2024 as central banks maintain a tight policy stance. Absent unanticipated shocks, we expect global growth to firm in 2025, it added.

"We forecast real economic activity in advanced G-20 economies to decelerate from an estimated 1.7 per cent in 2023 to just 1 per cent in 2024 and recover to 1.8 per cent in 2025," said Madhavi Bokil, Senior Vice President, CSR, at Moody's Investors Service.

Growth in G-20 emerging markets will slow from 4.4 per cent in 2023 to 3.7 per cent in 2024 and 3.8 per cent in 2025.

"The global economy is still adjusting to the rapid monetary policy and financial tightening orchestrated by advanced and EM central banks in a near-simultaneous response to surging inflation in 2021 and 2022. While economic activity has displayed considerable resilience, it is slowing. Inflation is also receding as supply and demand come into better balance," Moody's report said.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 12-11-2023**Government in denial, economy in distress****P Chidambaram**

There are economists and economists. There are also bank economists. If you believe some economists, nothing is wrong with India's economy or its management and, even better, nothing can go wrong ever. If you believe bank economists, RBI is in heaven and all is well with India's economy (until the RBI drops a hint to the contrary). I wish they were as true as they are loyal.

On October 1, 2023, we stepped into the last half year of the present government that will complete 10 years on May 30, 2024. April and May 2024 will be a virtual

holiday for governance. It is therefore a good time to review the state of the economy,

In a developing country like India, the GDP growth rate is the one number, more than any other metric, that reflects the state of the economy. Let me therefore begin with the growth rate in the ten years of BJP's rule. According to NSO's figures, in the first nine years the average growth rate was 5.7 per cent. Adding the growth rate projected by the government of 6.5 per cent in 2023-24, the average for the ten years will be 5.8 per cent. Compare this to the growth rates achieved under UPA-I and UPA-II. The average of the five years of UPA-I was 8.5 per cent and the average of the ten years of UPA-I and UPA-II was 7.5 per cent.

Some economists may dismiss the decline of 1.8 per cent as inconsequential. That would be completely wrong. The decline has grave implications for national security, infrastructure spending, investments, job creation, welfare measures, household consumption, savings, poverty reduction, and improvements in education and health.

Two Top Concerns

The two concerns uppermost in the minds of the people are price rise and unemployment. Thanks to rising prices, every family, except the rich — say, the top 10 per cent — finds it difficult to balance the household budget. The All India Consumer Prices Index (New Series) that stood at 112 in 2013-14 rose to 174 in December 2022. Food inflation is close to 10 per cent. The immediate consequence is a cut in household consumption. At every level of income, households are economising on expenditure or dipping into their savings. Net financial assets of households have plummeted to a low of 5.1 per cent. FMCG companies have introduced smaller packages for the same price to retain brand loyalty. The reduced numbers in the sale of two wheelers is a good indicator of the impact of price rise on household consumption.

The other top concern is unemployment. Contrary to claims, millions of jobs have not been created in the last 10 years and certainly not the promised 2 crore jobs a year (since explained as an election jumla). The data shows that in every year of the last 10 years, except one, the unemployment rate has been above 7 per cent. The unemployment rate among graduates is 42 per cent according to the State of Working India 2023 report. The unemployment rate among youth (15-24 years) stood at 23.22 per cent in 2022. Most 'employment' today is self-employment (57 per cent). The proportion of regular wage employees has fallen from 24 per cent to 21 per cent.

CMIE data shows that the number of government jobs declined by 22 per cent under the present government (during 2015-2023).

Reading Tea Leaves

The Ministry of Finance publishes a monthly review. The September 2023 Review released on October 23 speaks in code language: risks to the near term global outlook, persistent cost pressures, upward drift in inflation expectations, policy rates higher for longer, abrupt reassessment of liquidity and credit risks, adverse supply shocks in commodity markets and spike in energy prices. In plain English, the Review's sombre conclusion is that the economic outlook is gloomy, growth will slow down, prices will rise, interest rates will be higher, household consumption will be reduced, savings will decline and borrowings will increase.

An economist of a rating agency wrote, recently, "Bank credit growth remains strong at over 15 per cent, with retail credit growth at over 18 per cent." Impressive indeed, until one drills into the data and discovers that credit growth is driven by growth in personal loans (23 per cent) and gold loans (22 per cent). Credit growth to industry in August 2023 was just 6.1 per cent. The average monthly income has fallen by 9.2 per cent over the last four quarters (from Rs 12,700 to Rs 11,600) and the average daily wage for a rural casual labourer has fallen from Rs 409 to Rs 388. It is a fair inference that the growth in personal loans and gold loans was for consumption. Reading the tea leaves can be a hazardous exercise.

Three Engines Stalled

Economists have pointed out that the engine of government investment alone seems to be working while private investment, private consumption and exports have stalled. There are ways and means to accelerate exports, stimulate private investment and encourage more consumption. As long as the government is in denial of the weaknesses and threats it cannot find the strengths and the opportunities. It has been a hard autumn, the winter could be harsh and we can only hope that spring will bring cheer.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 15-11-2023

A troubling double-digit dal-roti inflation

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Shaktikanta Das, last week, said that headline consumer price index (CPI) inflation remains vulnerable to "recurring and overlapping food price shocks". He couldn't have been more right. The latest CPI numbers for October show overall annual retail inflation at 4.87 per cent, falling for

a third successive month from 7.44 per cent in July. Moreover, “core” CPI inflation, which excludes price rise in food and fuel, was at a 43-month-low of 4.28 per cent in October. And given negative fuel and light inflation (minus 0.39 per cent), it is food prices that are the problem. At 6.61 per cent, food inflation was higher than the general CPI inflation. Within food, however, there are volatile components such as vegetables, that are prone to seasonal supply shocks, translating into high inflation as seen for tomato in July-August and for onion more recently. These often self-correct with fresh crop arrivals; vegetable inflation has already plunged, from 37.4 to 2.7 per cent between July and October.

It’s the more sticky components of food inflation that should really worry the RBI and the government ahead of next year’s national elections. These specially pertain to cereals and pulses — in other words, dal-roti. Retail cereal inflation, at 10.65 per cent, has been ruling at double-digits for 14 consecutive months since September 2022. It has been similarly so for five months in pulses, with the current inflation of 18.79 per cent the highest since August 2016. This clearly has to do with a not-too-great monsoon. The Agriculture Ministry’s estimates show cereal production in the recent kharif season to be 6.6 million tonnes (mt) lower than last year’s, with rice output alone down from 110.5 mt to 106.3 mt. Production of kharif pulses is pegged to be the lowest since 2015, with shortfalls in tur (pigeon pea) as well as urad (black gram) and moong (green gram).

With the post-monsoon season (October-December) rainfall turning out 26 per cent below normal so far and El Niño’s effects projected to last through the spring and beyond, one shouldn’t place too much hope on the rabi crop either. The Narendra Modi government has managed the just-about comfortable wheat and rice stocks with the Food Corporation of India well, by restoring the original 5 kg/person/month quota for ration cardholders (from 10 kg during the Covid period) and stepping-up open market sales to cool prices. It must do more to augment supplies by scrapping the 40 per cent import duty on wheat and also those on yellow/white peas and chana (chickpea), now at 50-60 per cent. Cutting tariffs may encounter farmer opposition, but double-digit dal-roti inflation should be a greater government concern — both economic and political.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 2-11-2023

India, Bangladesh launch three major connectivity, energy projects

Rezaul H Laskar

India and Bangladesh on Wednesday inaugurated three major connectivity and energy projects built with Indian

assistance, including a railway line that will connect the northeastern states to the neighbouring country for the first time.

The projects — the Akhaura-Agartala cross-border rail link, the Khulna-Mongla port rail line, and unit II of the Maitree super thermal power plant — were jointly launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina at a virtual ceremony.

The development comes at a time when Hasina is facing increasing pressure from opposition parties in Bangladesh and some Western nations to ensure free and fair elections early next year. Under the Modi government, India has emerged as Bangladesh’s largest development partner, with a portfolio of almost \$10 billion in the form of grants and concessional loans.

Addressing the ceremony, Modi emphasised the focus placed by the two countries on developing infrastructure and connectivity to meet the aspirations of their people, and said that over the past nine years, both sides had launched three new bus services and as many rail services. They had also opened four new immigration check posts and launched container and parcel trains in 2022, he said.

“Our collaboration in the power sector and connectivity stands out as a shining example of our win-win cooperation,” Hasina said, speaking in Bengali. She also highlighted her government’s vision of creating an advanced, prosperous and smart Bangladesh by 2041.

“India will continue providing complete cooperation to advance your smart Bangladesh,” Modi said, noting that 12 IT parks are being built with Indian aid while the two sides had also agreed to link their payment gateways.

Bangladesh has a central place in India’s “Neighbourhood First” policy and many development projects implemented with Indian aid are aimed at bolstering connectivity between the neighbouring country and India’s strategic and landlocked northeastern region.

The Akhaura-Agartala cross-border rail link will connect India’s northeast to Bangladesh by rail for the first time. It will also facilitate better connectivity between Bangladesh’s Chattogram port and the northeast and boost trade and tourism.

This is the sixth cross-border rail link, and it connects Bangladesh’s Gangasagar station on the Dhaka-Chattogram line to Nischintapur station in Tripura. The total length of the link is 12.24 km and the project was completed at a cost of \$150 million. This includes 6.78 km of dual gauge line in Bangladesh built with an Indian grant of about \$50 million.

The 64.7-km Khulna-Mongla port railway line connects Bangladesh's second-largest port to the country's rail network for the first time. It is also connected to India via the Petrapole cross-border rail link. The \$380-million project was completed with an Indian line of credit.

The Maitree super thermal power project, built under an Indian concessional financing scheme loan of \$1.6 billion, is a 1,320 MW plant located in the Khulna division of Bangladesh. Unit II was inaugurated on Wednesday, while Unit I was launched by the two prime ministers in September 2022. The project is meant to meet the growing energy needs of the people and businesses in southern Bangladesh and to contribute to energy security in the neighbourhood.

The project has been implemented by the Bangladesh-India Friendship Power Company Private Limited, a 50-50 joint venture between India's NTPCL and the Bangladesh Power Development Board.

Modi, who spoke in Hindi, said the two countries had finalised a long-pending land boundary agreement and settled their maritime boundary to ensure peace, security and stability on the borders. They have also developed their inland waterways for the movement of passengers and goods.

He said Bangladesh's Chattogram and Mongla ports have been linked to India's northeastern states, and the connectivity initiatives served as a lifeline during the Covid-19 pandemic when more than 4,000 tonnes of liquid medical oxygen was transported to Bangladesh.

"The inauguration of the Akhaura-Agartala rail link is a historic moment as this is the first rail link between India's northeastern states and Bangladesh...The Khulna-Mongla rail link will link Mongla port to trade centres in Dhaka and Kolkata," he said.

Modi noted that the northeastern state of Tripura has been exporting 160 MW of power to Bangladesh since 2015, while the first cross-border high-speed diesel pipeline was inaugurated in March this year. This bilateral cooperation has strengthened Bangladesh's energy security and helped it move towards self-reliance, he added.

He said India's approach of "sabka saath, sabka vikas" has been extended to its closest neighbours such as Bangladesh, and the joint efforts of both countries will help realise the vision of "Shonar (golden) Bangladesh" of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of the country and the father of Hasina.

Hasina pointed to several steps taken by her government to boost connectivity and foster trade between Bangladesh and India's northeastern states. She said Chattogram and Mongla sea ports and Chattogram

airport have been opened for use by India. A rail service has been launched on the strategic Padma bridge and a new tunnel under the Kornophuli River will increase the capacity of Chattogram port, she said.

This collaboration has ensured peace and stability in India's northeastern region, Hasina pointed out. "We will prove that good relations with a neighbour improve our bilateral relations and the progress of a country. This is an example for the world," she said.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 7-11-2023

India, Bhutan agree on new initiatives to bolster trade, connectivity

Rezaul H Laskar

India and Bhutan on Monday agreed on several new initiatives to bolster collaboration in trade, technology and cross-border connectivity, including a survey for the first rail link between the two sides to be built with Indian support.

The measures were agreed on during a meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and visiting Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who is on a week-long trip to the country with a delegation of senior officials. The visit comes against the backdrop of reports of China and Bhutan inching towards an agreement to settle their disputed boundary.

Modi assured Wangchuck of India's commitment to its friendship and cooperation with Bhutan and reiterated the country's "continued and full support to the socio-economic development in Bhutan", according to a joint statement.

Besides agreeing on carrying out the "final location survey" for the planned cross-border rail link between Kokrajhar in Assam and Gelephu in Bhutan in consultation with the Bhutanese side, the two sides decided to consider establishing another rail link between Banarhat in West Bengal and Samtse in Bhutan, the joint statement said.

Indian Railways has already completed the preliminary engineering-cum-traffic survey for the 57-km Kokrajhar-Gelephu rail link, which will be built with Indian support. The rail link is part of Bhutan's ambitious plan to construct a special economic zone (SEZ) at Gelephu, and the project figured in Wangchuck's discussions with Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma in Guwahati last week.

In order to strengthen trade infrastructure, the two sides agreed to upgrade the existing land customs station at Dadgiri in Assam into an integrated check post with India's support, and to develop facilities at Gelephu on the Bhutanese side.

The two sides further agreed to designate Darranga in Assam and Samdrup Jongkhar in Bhutan as the site for an immigration check post to facilitate the entry and exit of third country nationals by land route for enhancing connectivity and promoting tourism, the joint statement said.

As part of efforts to ramp up trade and connectivity, they decided to designate the Haldibari (West Bengal)-Chilahati (Bangladesh) rail link as an additional route for Bhutan's trade with Bangladesh.

The Indian government will provide bridge financing for the period between the 12th and 13th five-year plans of Bhutan for projects and schemes aided by the Indian side, the joint statement said.

The Bhutanese side thanked India for the timely release of development assistance to ensure the smooth conclusion of crucial projects under its 12th five-year plan for 2018-23. "To take the exemplary bilateral partnership forward, the Indian side reiterated commitment to step up support for Bhutan's 13th Five Year Plan, which was welcomed by the Bhutanese side," the joint statement added.

Bhutan has been the biggest beneficiary of India's external aid in the budget for 2023-24, being allocated ₹2,400 crore out of the total outlay of ₹5,408 crore for assistance to foreign countries.

The Indian side also agreed on several measures aimed at boosting cooperation in areas such as education and environmental conservation. The joint statement said India will positively consider Bhutan's request for concessional financing for skill development and capacity building under the country's Gyalsung Project, which is a one-year integrated training programme mandatory for all persons attaining the age of 18.

India will allocate additional MBBS seats for Bhutanese students in medical colleges in Assam to ensure access to quality medical education, and double the outlay under the ambassador's scholarship for Bhutanese students pursuing higher education in India.

The two sides will strengthen collaboration in environmental conservation, wildlife preservation and forestry under a framework MoU as part of their shared commitment to safeguarding the region's ecological diversity.

The Bhutan king will also travel to Mumbai, where he will interact with business leaders to explore new avenues for expanding economic and commercial ties. He is expected to seek investments for the proposed SEZ at Gelephu.

The joint statement said India and Bhutan enjoy "long-standing and exceptional" ties characterised by utmost

trust, goodwill and mutual understanding. The Bhutan king's visit was an opportunity to discuss various aspects of multifaceted bilateral ties and forge understanding to further cooperate across diverse sectors.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 13-11-2023

What will happen to Bangladesh's economy?

Mamun Rashid

Ever since the investment community started to talk about a rising Bangladesh and the potential the economy offers due to increased consumer spending, we get to host many international investors. Now that things are going a little topsy-turvy, the question is again surfacing: What may happen to the economy?

No doubt, the ongoing political unrest and the garment workers' agitation in the apparel sector have begun to take their toll on the economy that is already grappling with higher inflation, the depreciating taka, slowing exports and reducing private sector activities.

Both passenger and cargo traffic on the roads inside the cities and highways have drastically reduced for the fear of getting caught up in clashes or arson. The seaports, which handle almost 90 percent of the \$130-billion cross-border trade, have registered a decline in cargoes as most businesses preferred not to transport goods.

The same is the case with the transportation of consumer goods from factories to the points of sales across the country and farm produce to cities and towns, resulting in even an interim price hike. No doubt, if this continues, the situation will worsen, and sales will plummet.

This disruption in the supply chain will further fuel inflation, which despite issues with our data integrity, surged to double digits in October and caused more suffering to people at the bottom of the pyramid. The current situation is also impacting the regular or ongoing efforts to stabilise the economy.

Although the economy has been under stress for a year and a half now, things have not gone out of control yet. The ongoing situation is creating uncertainty and troubles for the economy and obviously, the continuation of the political unrest could hit the economy hard.

We have seen some violence and political uncertainty in every election year. But many feel it is different this time. Even the central bank governor has reportedly said he didn't face this sort of crisis in his entire professional career. Whether prudent or not, he also mentioned that the economy has reached its bottom.

Hence, Bangladesh's economic problems have turned into a crisis already. And any political unrest may deepen the crisis. The global situation is not favourable either.

Many already urged the government to reach a political consensus through effective dialogue. Otherwise, it will be extremely difficult to revive the economy after the election despite few in the regulatory bodies still sounding optimistic.

If the political unrest continues, it will heavily impact apparel exports. The sector operates under a tight schedule, so blockades or strikes for two to three days throw off the schedule. We already know buyers have the option to shift orders to other countries as many competitor countries have huge capacity. Even the neighbouring one is trying hard to build similar capacities.

Amid the political unrest, garment workers have been protesting for 12 days for a minimum wage of about Tk 25,000. The unrest has led to the suspension of production in as many as 500 factories. Though the minimum wage board has announced a wage hike to Tk 12,500, the protest continues. Even many amongst development partners and off-takers countries are not happy with the way the situation was handled.

Since the country, despite visible progress on the economic front, has almost failed to ensure a peaceful political transition every five years, this kind of scenario is quite known to us. However, over the period of time, the opposition has gained much public support and inner strength too. Besides, our major development partners also identified a congenial political environment to be the most important for sustainable economic progress.

Sooner all the stakeholders come to terms, the better for all of us.

The author is an economic analyst

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 7-11-2023

Food inflation rises further

Business Correspondent

The inflation rate in the food sector increased to 12.56 per cent in the month of October this year, which was 8.50 per cent at this time last year. It was 12.37 per cent in the previous month of September.

Meanwhile, the country's inflation rate rose to 9.93 per cent in October from 9.63 per cent in September, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) data released on Monday.

The non-food inflation rate was recorded at 8.30 per cent in October, up from 7.82 per cent the previous month.

In rural areas, inflation outpaced urban areas, shooting up to 9.99 per cent last month from 9.75 per cent in September.

Sources said that the government had set a target of keeping inflation within 6 per cent for the current fiscal year. But inflation has never gone below 9.6 per cent in the last four months. The biggest challenge of the government is to keep within the target of this year.

According to the BBS report, the country's wheat price inflation was 9.93 per cent in the month of October. Inflation of 9.93 per cent means that the product which was bought for Tk 100 in October of the previous year has to be bought for Tk 109.93 in October this year, food products have to be bought for Tk 112.56. Non-food inflation rose to 8.3 per cent in October. It was 7.82 per cent in the previous month as well.

According to the Consumer Price Index report released by BBS on Monday, urban people suffer slightly less than rural people when it comes to buying daily goods, but it is also uncomfortable. The average price inflation in urban areas is 9.72 per cent. However, food inflation in cities is much higher than in villages. Food inflation in urban areas is 12.58 per cent. And the inflation of non-food products is 8.50 per cent.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 4-11-2023

Investment in Bangladeshi startups sees significant decline

Cautious investment climate marks Bangladesh's Q3 startup scene, reveals report by LightCastle Partners

The local startup scene is experiencing notable downward shifts in funding trends, even as the global startup ecosystem indicates slight growth. On a global scale, startup investments have risen marginally by 7%, totalling a formidable USD 73 billion in the third quarter of this year. But funding in Bangladesh plummeted to a mere USD 4.0 million in Q3 2023, a drastic 77% decline in comparison to the same period last year.

This trend was revealed in the recently released Bangladesh Startup Investment Report for Q3 2023 by LightCastle Partners.

The decline is even more poignant when considering the previous year's figures. Excluding a significant USD 30 million deal secured by ShopUp, quarterly investments have consistently hovered below the USD 10 million mark, showing a 42% dip from the preceding quarter. Furthermore, the total startup funding over the first

three quarters of 2023 stood at USD 47.5 million, marking a stark 50% reduction from the previous year's figures.

In Q3 2023, Bangladesh's startup funding sphere saw active involvement from just two investors. This limited participation signals an air of caution, with most players maintaining a risk-averse posture throughout the year. Meanwhile, angel investors maintained their influence, mirroring their contributions from the second quarter.

Amidst these fluctuations, local investors have risen to dominate the investment landscape in Bangladesh. They accounted for an impressive 84% of total investments in Q3 2023, marking their presence in all six deals during this quarter. This significant involvement from local investors underscores a strategic shift, with local entities becoming key stakeholders in Bangladesh's startup journey.

Early-stage funding, which makes up a significant portion of the startup ecosystem, remained stable and showed no sign of waning. It constituted 62% of the total investments in the third quarter, maintaining its previous quarter's momentum.

Drawing a broader regional comparison, China sustained its stronghold in Asia with a modest 23% spike in funding during Q3. Notably, Singaporean startups experienced a remarkable threefold surge in investments, amounting to an impressive USD 3.4 billion. This Asian uptrend sharply contrasts with the diminishing enthusiasm in India and Pakistan. Indian startups experienced their lowest quarterly funding, amassing only USD 1.5 billion. Concurrently, Pakistan underwent a significant 88% dip in funding compared to the same period last year.

Within this Asian spectrum, Bangladesh, unfortunately, trailed behind, attracting the smallest funding chunk among the mentioned nations.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 13-11-2023

Sri Lanka calls for revisiting FTA with Pakistan

*Private Sector Collaboration, Regular Exchanges of
Trade Delegations essential to improve ties*

Consul General of Sri Lanka Jagath Abeywarna mentioned that, despite 75 years of friendly diplomatic relations and a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) since 2005, Sri Lanka-Pakistan Trade volume remains 'insignificant' at US\$ 440 million, due to certain barriers preventing trade between both sides.

"Pakistan's exports to Sri Lanka stood at US\$ 360 million, and Sri Lankan exports remained at US\$ 80

million. To enhance this trade, the FTA has to be revisited, and a mechanism devised to facilitate transactions between exporters and importers of both countries facing a dire shortage of foreign currency. As we both are going through a difficult economic situation, we have to help each other," he said during a visit to the Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI).

"Pakistan was the number one buyer of Sri Lankan products, particularly Ceylon tea, which, unfortunately, is no longer being exported to Pakistan, as the importers here are now importing tea from Kenya and other countries," he said.

He highlighted that, collaboration between the Private Sectors through participation in Trade Fairs and regular exchanges of Trade Delegations is essential to achieving the common goal of improved trade ties. "Several sectors can promote trade between the two countries, including pharmaceuticals, fabrics, leather, etc., which are being imported by Sri Lanka. We can also provide construction materials, ceramics, false ceilings, cosmetics, rubber-based products, and agricultural products to Pakistan," he added.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 6-11-2023

India's FM launches new initiatives countrywide

India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman led a five-member official delegation as well as a high-powered business delegation consisting of senior functionaries of leading industry organisations like Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICII) to Sri Lanka from November 1 to 3.

The India's Finance Minister called on President Ranil Wickremesinghe and Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena during the visit. She paid respects to the Chief Prelates of the Asgiriya and Malwatta Chapters and also offered prayers at the Sacred Sri Dalada Maligawa in Kandy and Sacred Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi Temple in Anuradhapura, in addition to Nallur Kandaswamy Temple in Jaffna. She was the Guest of Honour at 'Naam 200' event to mark 200 years of arrival of the Indian origin Tamil community to Sri Lanka and delivered the keynote address at an India – Sri Lanka Business Summit – Enhancing Connectivity; Partnering for Prosperity. She also inaugurated branches of State Bank of India in Trincomalee and Jaffna during the visit.

She held discussions with the President on Thursday (2) and they witnessed the exchange of bilateral documents,

which pave way for early commencement of projects under the US\$ 15 million grant announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the promotion of Buddhist ties between the two countries. First project being undertaken under this grant is the solar electrification of places of worship across the country with a grant allocation of US\$ 10 million and the MoU regarding details of the project was also exchanged recently.

India's Finance Minister announced in 'Naam 200' event that Indian Government would soon send trainers to equip teachers in STEM subjects in plantation regions of Sri Lanka. As one of the first projects under the SLR three billion multi-sectoral package announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in July 2023 for the Indian origin Tamil community, qualified trainers from India would be deployed in Sri Lanka for defined periods towards achieving this. She also outlined several other projects which are being rolled out under the package including solar lanterns for plantation workers, stitching units for women self-help groups etc. In the education sphere, she kicked off the supply of notebooks and school bags to 10,000 school-going children in the plantation regions and started a project to distribute RO plants among schools to address drinking water problems in selected schools.

The India's Finance Minister virtually launched the Phase-4 of flagship Indian Housing Project (IHP) for the construction of 10,000 houses for plantation workers along with the President. This is an extension of the third phase under which close to 4,000 houses have been built in these regions. It may be recalled that a total of around 50,000 houses have been completed under IHP till date. She also virtually inaugurated the upgraded Thondaman Vocational Training Centre in Hatton along with President Wickremesinghe. The Indian Government built several facilities in the Centre and provided equipment including desktop computers towards imparting employable skills of youth.

The visit is expected to give further impetus to bilateral engagements in the economic sphere. Industry captains who visited Sri Lanka from several sectors sought mutually beneficial investment opportunities and sustainable commercial partnerships in Sri Lanka. The Business Summit was a meeting of minds platform in which both Indian and Sri Lankan business entities came together to discuss future collaborations.

It may be recalled that Finance Minister Sitharaman had strongly advocated for Sri Lanka in IMF meetings in 2022 which was critical in enabling the IMF package for Sri Lanka. As the Finance Minister, her role in fast tracking the multi-pronged support of US\$ four billion by India last year was instrumental.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 12-11-2023

Nepal's debt grows by Rs41 billion in the first quarter

International Monetary Fund suggests Nepal continue borrowing foreign loans at concessional terms.

Post Report

Nepal's public debt grew by Rs41.25 billion during the first quarter of the current fiscal year as outstanding total debt reached Rs2,340.60 billion, the Public Debt Management Office said.

Total debt accounts for 43.49 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) as public debt against the GDP has been on the rise over the last few years.

Even though the outstanding external debt decreased amid higher debt servicing and limited inflow during the first quarter, the government's continued borrowing from domestic creditors contributed to a rise in overall debt, the quarterly report of the PDMO suggests.

During the first quarter, Nepal's external debt decreased by Rs13 billion while domestic debt grew by Rs54.27 billion.

"There has been a rapid rise in public debt in recent years as the country is receiving domestic and foreign debts to meet the resource gap," said Dilaram Giri, officiating chief of PDMO.

According to the International Monetary Fund, Nepal witnessed a gradual decline in the debt-to-GDP ratio from 35 percent in the fiscal year 2011-12 to 25 percent in the fiscal 2016-17, which is a sign of improving economic health.

Nepal started to take large loans from domestic and external creditors after the country had to undertake post-earthquake reconstruction work starting with the fiscal 2015-16.

Subsequent borrowing for spending to control the Covid pandemic increased the debt burden.

By the end of last fiscal year, the country's total outstanding debt stood at Rs2,299.35 billion, or 42.73 percent of the GDP, according to the PDMO.

With the government struggling to raise revenue as targeted, it was forced to rely on domestic and external debt to bridge the gap.

Likewise, the government debt liability also increased due to the high cost of raising domestic loans as interest rates soared due to the liquidity crunch in the banking system.

Despite rising debt liability, the government is still not facing debt distress, according to the IMF. It said in May that Nepal's public debt is projected to stabilise (at about 50 percent of GDP) in the medium term, and

present values of both the public debt-to-GDP and external debt-to-GDP ratios are projected to remain below their indicative thresholds.

It, however, stressed that Nepal needed to continue utilising external borrowing at concessional terms as envisaged in the Medium-Term Debt Management Strategy. Nepal's Development Cooperation Policy has, however, opened the door for taking external loans at commercial terms, too, an option that Nepal has not utilised yet.

Nepal's Public Debt Management Act caps the external debt that the government can receive. As per the law, it should not be more than a third of the previous fiscal year's GDP. Officials said the limit was set to prevent the government from making reckless borrowing of external credit.

As of the first quarter of the current fiscal, Nepal's external debt stands at 21.5 percent of GDP. "We still have margin to grow our external debt," Giri said.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 13-11-2023

Nepal may approach Pakistan for sugar import

*Delhi has okayed a quota of 25,000 tonnes for Nepal
but complications crop up.*

Krishana Prasain

KATHMANDU, With the Indian government quoting a high price for sugar, which Nepal plans to import through a government-to-government arrangement, top Nepali government officials said they may approach Pakistan for the sweetener if India's offer doesn't prove sweet enough.

Due to issues ranging from quality (small crystal sugar) to pricing, the process of importing sugar in a government-to-government deal to meet the Tihar festival demand has been deferred, sources privy to the matter told the Post. Nepal's annual sugar requirement is around 270,000 tonnes.

The country faces an annual deficit of about 100,000 tonnes of the sweetener, which is fulfilled through imports by the private sector and sometimes by two government companies.

The annual import of sugar is worth nearly Rs3 billion, according to the Department of Customs.

On November 2, New Delhi allowed the export of 25,000 tonnes of sugar on a quota basis to Nepal till September 30 next year, as Nepal is struggling to meet the demand.

The price of sugar, which was Rs75 per kg in the retail market a few weeks before the Dashain, surged to Rs130 per kg after India's export restriction.

The price has jumped to Rs160 per kg and the commodity is not easily available in the market, traders say. The shortage did not subside in Tihar too, even after the government's commitment.

Consumers faced hardship as sugar was not easily available in the market even after setting a record high price during Nepal's key festive season.

Dashain, Tihar and Chhath are key festivals in the country when sugar is consumed more, mainly to make sweets.

Traders charged that the government's mechanism failed to import sugar even after committing to do so.

"The Indian government has offered to provide S30 sugar from Gujarat, which is of inferior quality. The size of the crystals is very small," said Gajendra Kumar Thakur, joint secretary at the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies.

"The first issue was the quality. And second, it was not possible to import sugar from Gujarat in a short period which resulted in a shortage in Tihar," said Thakur.

The S30 is the most common white refined sugar.

On November 2, India's Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution allowed the export of 25,000 tonnes of sugar to Nepal.

Subsequently, the Nepal government decided to import 20,000 tonnes from the 25,000 tonnes quota it was given, through a government-to-government arrangement.

The government's supply bodies—Salt Trading Corporation and Food Management and Trading Company—were assigned to import 10,000 tonnes each. Thakur said it takes six days to import sugar from Gujarat.

Officials, however, said that due to the differences in the price, the import process has been delayed.

According to officials, the price offered by the Indian government is 25 percent higher compared to the existing price.

"We are in negotiations with the Indian side as the deadline to import sugar is one year. We are negotiating on price and quality," said Thakur.

Officials at the industry ministry said that they could import medium crystal sugar from Pakistan as prices are comparatively cheaper. Under the government-to-government arrangement, India has assigned its supply body National Cooperative Exports Limited to export sugar.

According to Thakur, as sugarcane harvest has started, supply will improve in the market soon. The domestic production will last for six months, he said.

On Sunday, the Salt Trading Corporation increased the price of sugar. The corporation, which was selling the sugar at Rs97 per kg before the Dashain festival, raised the price to Rs115.50 per kg.

The corporation has increased the quota to retailers and restaurateurs, allowing them to purchase 50 kg at a time from its official premise at Kalimati.

Earlier, it was providing 2 kg of sugar at the subsidised rate from its different outlets in Kathmandu.

Even though Salt Trading Corporation is providing sugar, people have to wait in long queues.

The five-day Tihar festival started on Saturday.

The festival of lights is celebrated with sweet treats as people prepare different sweet dishes like Nepali doughnuts among others to offer the Laxmi and give it to brothers on Bhai Tika, the fifth day of Tihar.

The sugar shortage in Nepal occurred after India's Directorate General of Foreign Trade, on October 18, extended the restriction on sugar exports beyond October 31.

Following India's move, Nepal's Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies asked for permission to import 60,000 tonnes of sugar in August to meet the anticipated festival demand.

However, the finance ministry delayed approval for the import. It issued permission on September 13, just a month ahead of the Dashain festival, causing a shortage of sweeteners in the country.

Due to the delay in import approval and bidding process, neither Salt Trading nor Food Management and Trading Company could not bring sugar on time.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 5-11-2023

SIF seeking to raise capital to support investments in SMEs

TEHRAN - Iran's SMEs Investment Guarantee Fund (SIF) is pursuing a plan to increase its capital by 100 percent in the current Iranian calendar year (ends in late March 2024), a member of the board of the fund said.

"In order to expand the role and duties of the SMEs Investment Guarantee Fund, the title and duties of the fund will be changed and developed," Mohammad-Sadeqh Mohammad-Yari said.

"One of the basic problems of the fund, which is always considered a serious obstacle in the way of developing activities, is the limitation of capital compared to the fund's services," Mohammad-Yari said.

"In this regard and in order to resolve this issue, we had many follow-ups and correspondences with various government departments, including the Industry, Mining and Trade Ministry, and finally, last year, 70 billion tomans [700 billion rials (about \$1.3 million)] was allocated to the fund; this year we are seeking a nearly 100 percent increase in the fund's capital," the official added.

- EF/MA

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 5-11-2023

Green tourism: new frontier for sustainable travel in Iran

By Afshin Majlesi

TEHRAN – As Iran looks to fully recover from the impact of the pandemic on its travel industry, new investments can provide a path toward sustainable tourism.

Available evidence suggests the genre is emerging as a new frontier for Iran's tourism when the world becomes more environmentally conscious and the concept of "green tourism" becomes increasingly important.

Home to diverse natural landscapes and cultural heritage gems, Iran has already taken steps to promote green tourism that focuses on minimizing the negative impact of conventional tourism on the environment in a sustainable approach.

The tourism industry of the country can benefit from green tourism in several ways. Firstly, it can help to diversify the country's tourism offerings beyond its historical and cultural attractions. By promoting its natural beauty and wildlife, Iran can attract a new segment of travelers who are interested in eco-tourism experiences.

Secondly, green tourism can help boost the local economies. Eco-tourism activities such as hiking and camping require local guides, porters, and other support staff, providing employment opportunities for people in rural areas. Additionally, eco-tourism can encourage the development of small businesses such as eco-lodges, organic farms, and handicraft shops, which can generate income for the locals.

Thirdly, green tourism can help to promote environmental conservation and sustainable development. By encouraging responsible tourism practices, such as reducing waste, conserving water, and protecting wildlife, Iran can help preserve its natural resources for future generations. Additionally, eco-tourism can raise awareness about environmental issues and promote sustainable development practices in local communities.

Among the challenges are lack of awareness and decent education. Many tourists are not aware of the impact that their travel has on the environment, and many locals and even industry professionals are not trained in sustainable tourism practices. Such a deficiency can lead to unsustainable practices; overuse of natural resources, pollution, and destruction of ecosystems.

Another challenge is the lack of desired infrastructure and resources. For example, there may be a lack of recycling facilities, public transportation, or eco-friendly accommodations in some areas. Experts, however, believe more needs to be done to ensure those efforts are bearable and have a positive impact on the environment and local communities. One of the key priorities in that regard is to promote eco-friendly transportation, reduce waste and carbon emissions, and support local communities through responsible practices.

Such investments can also help create new job opportunities and support the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism industry to help diversify the economy and reduce dependence on traditional industries.

Over the past couple of years, the Iranian tourism ministry, for its part, has made efforts to popularize green tourism. For example, during tourism week (which started on Sep. 27 to mark World Tourism Day), Iran held more than 150 recreational programs to promote green tourism, the deputy tourism minister said in September. Ali-Asghar Shalbafian underlined that green tourism is becoming increasingly popular among travelers who are seeking an authentic travel experience while minimizing their environmental footprint.

Green tourism, also known as sustainable tourism, is a growing trend in the global tourism industry. It involves promoting environmentally friendly practices and supporting local communities to ensure that tourism has a positive impact on the environment and society.

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TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 8-11-2023

Iran, China reach new agreements under 25-year partnership

TEHRAN – Iran's Finance and Economic Affairs Minister Ehsan Khandouzi said the 25-year strategic partnership plan between Iran and China has entered a new phase with new agreements being reached between various ministries of the two countries, IRIB reported.

According to Khandouzi, the mentioned agreements have been reached between the two sides during the

visit of Iran's delegation to the 6th China International Import Expo (CIIE).

"Specific projects were defined between the government departments of the respective ministries of Iran and China, and agreements were reached on the details of the implementation of the mentioned projects," Khandouzi said.

Regarding the private sectors of the two countries, some Iranian companies operating in China and some large Chinese companies operating in Iran faced obstacles, which were discussed and resolved by the relevant authorities, he explained.

"We are going to witness a significant growth in economic cooperation and investment between the two sides with the implementation of these projects," the minister noted.

Headed by Iran's First Vice President, Mohammad Mokhber, a senior delegation comprised of Economy Minister Ehsan Khandouzi, Industry, Mining, and Trade Minister Abbas Aliabadi, as well as the deputies of various ministries and the economic deputy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited China last week to attend the 6th CIIE.

Iran and China officially signed the document for 25-year comprehensive cooperation in March 2021.

The document was signed between Iran's former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

Back in December 2022, Iran and China finalized 16 memorandums of understanding (MOU) under the framework of the two countries' strategic 25-year agreement.

The MOUs were signed in an Iran-China comprehensive cooperation program summit which was held in Tehran on December 13 in the presence of Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber and China's Vice Premier Hu Chunhua.

The summit was focused on four areas explored by four committees between the two countries with the aim of paving the way for the implementation of the 25-year agreement.

Iran and China also signed 20 memoranda of understanding in the presence of the presidents of the two countries in Beijing in mid-February.

Heading a high-ranking delegation, Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi was on a three-day state visit to China starting February 14.

During President Raisi's visit to China, Tehran and Beijing signed a number of bilateral cooperation documents in the fields of agriculture, trade, tourism,

environmental protection, health, disaster relief, culture, and sports.

The documents include agreements in the field of transportation and industry worth \$12 billion and \$3.5 billion, respectively; the agreements cover various joint projects like the high-speed rail link between Tehran and Mashhad, and investment in the Imam Khomeini Airport City.

Investment in Iran's southeastern Mokran Coast and the purchase of Iranian oil were also mentioned in the documents.

Raisi's visit served as an example of the high level of mutual trust between China and Iran, as well as a milestone for bilateral ties.

Then in mid-July, the agreements signed between Iran and China during President Raisi's trip to Beijing in mid-February were turned into specified projects during the two countries' joint cooperation committee meeting, the Iranian finance and economic affairs minister announced.

Ehsan Khandouzi left Tehran for Beijing on July 12 to attend the Iran-China Joint Cooperation Committee meeting, which was held after four and half years.

"With the constructive atmosphere of the committee, we will soon witness good events in the fields of business and investment", the official wrote on his Twitter account on July 16.

Khandouzi further announced that Iran and China are going to begin the execution of some joint projects agreed upon in February by the presidents of the two countries, as of the following month.

According to the minister, the necessary follow-ups regarding the mentioned projects have been made over the last five months and the final decisions for the start of their implementations were made during a joint business event on July 13.

"President Raisi had an important trip to Beijing last winter and good agreements were made with the president of China; in this regard, the necessary follow-ups were made by various ministries during the last five months, and on Thursday (July 13) the first joint committee between Iran and China was held after 4.5 years," Khandouzi said.

"China is Iran's largest trading partner and the most important destination for the export of Iranian goods and an important part of our imports are also from China. Last year, China's share in Iran's (non-oil) trade was 24 percent," the minister added.

Back in early April, the Chinese ambassador to Tehran said: "This year is a good year for Iran-China relations."

Chang Hua made the remarks in a meeting with the members of the Iran-China Joint Chamber of Commerce and a number of Iranian traders and businessmen, who conduct trade with China, held at the place of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA) in Tehran.

Referring to China's growing economy, the envoy said this year is a good year for Iran-China relations, adding that during the meeting between the leaders of the two countries, important agreements were made, including the implementation of the 25-year cooperation agreement between the two countries, and a number of bilateral cooperation documents were signed in the fields of agriculture, tourism, culture, relief, and rescue, etc.

Majid-Reza Hariri, the head of the Iran-China Joint Chamber, also emphasized the desire of Iran's private sector to develop business relations with China and said there are obstacles in this direction. Among other things, issuing visas for Iranian businessmen, especially for their presence at trade fairs in China, is associated with problems, and facilitating it will definitely help the development of relations between the two sides.

- EF/MA

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 11-11-2023

Iran, Afghanistan ink 5 economic co-op MOUs

TEHRAN- Iran and Afghanistan signed five memorandums of understanding (MOUs) on cooperation in different economic sectors.

The MOUs were signed in a ceremony on Thursday night at the presence of Iranian Agriculture Minister Mohammad-Ali Nikbakht, President Raisi's special envoy for Afghanistan Hassan Kazemi Qomi, and Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs of the Taliban Government Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

As reported, the mentioned MOUs include the cooperation document of Iran-Afghanistan Joint Economic Committee meeting, the document of the two sides' Joint International Road Transport Cooperation Committee meeting, the MOU between Iran's Civil Aviation Organization (CAO) and the Afghan side, the MOU between Iran's Esfahan Steel Company and the Afghan side, and the MOU between Iran's Secretariat of Free Trade and Special Economic Zones and the Afghan sides.

Afghanistan's delegation arrived in Iran on Saturday (November 4). The 30-member delegation was led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

In the same day, Iran's capital Tehran hosted an Iran-Afghanistan Joint Economic Committee meeting for the first time after the new government in Afghanistan took office.

The Iranian and Afghan representatives to Joint Economic Committee held the first day of their meeting, with high-ranking economic officials of both countries being in attendance.

The formation of joint working groups in fields such as trade, transit, transportation, customs and the environment were discussed on the first day of the two-day meeting.

The two sides also agreed on the formation of several more working groups tasked with identifying problems in the way of economic cooperation between the two neighbors.

Also, Iranian Transport and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash hosted a meeting with Afghanistan's Acting Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation Hamidullah Akhundzada in which the two sides discussed ways of developing transport ties.

- MA

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 1-11-2023

Economy - New Challenges

A couple of weeks back, Morocco hosted the annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), sort of the global high table of the economic powers. The worrying performance of the global economy only made this summit that much more important. As expected, the IMF issued a veiled warning on the world economy and this, at the time not even taking into account the rising oil & gold prices and afresh supply chain bottlenecks arising largely due to the sad developments in Palestine. Its assessment opined that the global economy continues to recover from the pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the cost-of-living crisis. However, in retrospect, the resilience has been remarkable. Despite war, energy supply challenges, supply-chain disruptions in the food markets and unprecedented monetary tightening to combat decades-high inflation, fortunately economic activity has slowed but not stalled. Even so, growth remains slow and uneven, with widening divergences, still the global economy keeps limping along, if not sprinting in certain fields. The investors outlook continues to be conservative with the IMF projecting that the world economic growth will slow from 3.5% in 2022 to 3% this year and 2.9% next year, naturally remaining much below the historical average. The good news in the IMF prognosis though comes from the inflation predictor, where it sees the annual

rate of inflation - which caused a serious cost of living crisis across the world - to continue to decelerate. It dropped from 9.2% in 2022, to 5.9% this year and is forecast to be lower at 4.8% in 2024. Albeit, Core inflation, which excludes food and energy prices, is projected to decline rather gradually, to still hover around the 4.5% mark even next year in 2024, pointing to the reality that most developing countries aren't likely to return to pre-2022 inflation targets until 2025 or beyond with Pakistan being amongst the likely countries where inflation could be stubborn and persistent!

On the macroeconomic front its report while commenting on relatively stabilising conditions, nevertheless warned of the fallout from the consequences of new geopolitical risks—especially the ongoing decoupling between China and the West. Now the developments in Palestine are exacerbating such risks. “De-risking strategies by China and the United States and other OECD countries that aim to re-shore production domestically or friend-shore away from one another can result in a significant drag on growth around the world even when assuming no new trade restrictions on third or neutral countries, especially in Asia.

In short the world is steadily reversing the gains from globalisation, which despite its shortcomings, lifted many countries out of poverty.” The problem is that with the worsening fault line on global growth, the losers will not be one or two countries, but by and large everyone loses out due to fast brewing geo-economic fragmentation, leaving the global growth prospects once again in tatters. Countries like Pakistan that are significantly dependent on both sides and have a compromised domestic economic base can end up being the worst sufferers in such a cross fire. Meaning, similar to economic integration, the impact of geo-economic fragmentation will be felt primarily by the relatively economically weaker countries due to abruptly changing patterns of trade, technology, labour, capital, and the provision of global public goods. These channels interact within and across national borders as well as geographic blocs making it difficult for countries to make tough choices, especially when they don't have their own two feet to stand on. Consequently, we have to acknowledge the emergence of a multipolar world with the presence of a few dominant players. While United States will continue to be the single most influential presence, there are others like China who will seek to challenge them, either individually or as the axis of the like-minded. The existing multilateral

framework, evolved in the aftermath of the second World War may suddenly not be relevant anymore.

So, what exactly does it mean for Pakistan? The answers may not be very simple, but foremost and important, we have to realise that the general operating umbrella of the WTO that in many ways gave some sort of cover for needy countries like ours who need to play both sides, has probably been either rendered ineffective or it is no longer able to play an effective shield role in the aftermath of the slug fest between the global majors. In such a case the natural way forward for us should be: Both, changes in our current bilateral free trade agreements to suit our altered requirements and in finding economic alliances cum partnerships with like-minded and complementing countries. Additionally, reduced trade-led income convergence across countries will have significant welfare costs for low-income countries like ours, something that can in-turn invariably manifest itself in a push towards an aggregate effect towards lowering living standards - A development, which if not checked in a timely fashion can more likely than not, result in large scale social unrest. The trouble is that amidst all these fast emerging new economic challenges facing the world in general and Pakistan in particular, there seems to be a leadership vacuum at home.

And if we are to successfully steer our economic ship out of these crises in the coming months, not only will this void have to be addressed, but more importantly a slogan will also have to be effectively launched by the new leadership on a broader consensus amongst all stakeholders in assembling an economic team that is acceptable to everyone and at the same time has the capacity and credibility to undertake prudent policymaking and its implementation.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 8-11-2023

China's GDP to grow by 5.4 percent in 2023: IMF

BEIJING, Nov. 7 (Xinhua) -- China's real gross domestic product (GDP) is projected to grow by 5.4 percent in 2023, an International Monetary Fund (IMF) statement said on Tuesday.

"The Chinese economy is on track to meet the government's 2023 growth target, reflecting a strong post-COVID recovery," read the statement made by the IMF's First Deputy Managing Director, Gita Gopinath, following a visit to China.

An IMF team, led by Sonali Jain-Chandra, Mission Chief for China, visited China from Oct. 26 to Nov. 7 to conduct discussions on the 2023 Article IV Consultation.

The mission team held constructive discussions with senior officials from the government, the People's Bank of China, private sector representatives and academics to exchange views on economic prospects and risks, reform progress and challenges, and policy responses.

Gopinath joined the policy discussions, and issued the statement at the end of the visit.

At a press briefing at the conclusion of the mission on Tuesday in Beijing, Gopinath said the projection reflects an upward revision of 0.4 percentage points in 2023 relative to the World Economic Outlook released in October, due to a stronger-than-expected Q3 outturn and recent policy announcements.

"China's growing leadership to address the global challenges, such as climate and debt crises, is vital for China and the world. China's role in supporting debt restructuring in low-income and vulnerable countries is welcome, and continued progress is needed for timely debt relief," said the statement.

Thomas Helbling, deputy director of the IMF's Asia and Pacific Department, told the briefing that China's opportunities in the future arise from good fundamentals, including its human capital and good business environment.

China has moved up the value chain and strengthened research and development, said Helbling, adding that "we would expect the R&D and innovation will play a great role going forward."

China's GDP expanded 4.9 percent in the third quarter (Q3), up 1.3 percent over Q2. It grew 5.2 percent year on year in the first three quarters of 2023, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

China only needs GDP growth of 4.4 percent year on year in the fourth quarter to meet its annual growth target of around 5 percent.

Following the release of China's economic data for the first three quarters, with third-quarter performance surpassing market expectations, a number of international financial institutions have expressed optimism on China's growth outlook for 2023, saying that positive factors are accumulating.

The UBS raised its forecast for China's GDP growth in 2023 to 5.2 percent from 4.8 percent previously, while Deutsche Bank, Nomura and JP Morgan have all lifted

China's full-year GDP growth forecast due to the growing body of optimistic data.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 13-11-2023

Where Chinese economy holds in ministers' eyes

BEIJING, Nov. 12 (Xinhua) -- China's economy has sustained a recovery momentum in the first three quarters, with the gross domestic product rising 5.2 percent year on year and per capita disposable income up 5.9 percent after deducting price factors.

What will be the outlook of the world's second-largest economy in the fourth quarter? How will the country strengthen efforts to promote economic expansion further and improve people's livelihood?

Xinhua has held a series of in-depth interviews with a number of ministerial-level officials. The following are the key takeaways of ministers' views on the questions:

MACROECONOMY

-- Zheng Shanjie, head of China's top economic planner

"We are confident, well-positioned, and capable of overcoming various risks and challenges, promoting a sustained and stable economic recovery in the fourth quarter, and realizing the expected economic and social development goals and tasks throughout the year with high quality," said Zheng, head of the National Development and Reform Commission.

Tax and fee reduction measures will be concretely implemented while the issuance and use of special-purpose local government bonds will be accelerated. Financing support for the manufacturing sector's transformation and upgrading, small and micro-sized enterprises, as well as private enterprises, will be increased.

The government will also accelerate the cultivation and expansion of strategic emerging industries, stimulate new momentum for the innovative development of the digital economy, and accelerate the transformation and upgrading of traditional industries.

While accelerating the construction of public infrastructure, such as the renovation of shanty towns in cities and the construction of affordable housing, the government also seeks to strictly control new "hidden" local government debts and resolve existing debts in an effective and orderly manner. The "hidden" debt is separate from on-budget borrowings.

Efforts will also be made to boost employment among college graduates, migrant workers, and other groups. Meanwhile, the government will ensure market supply and maintain price stability for essential livelihood commodities, and ensure the supply of coal, electricity, oil, gas, as well as transport services during the winter season.

FINANCING & MONETARY POLICIES

-- Pan Gongsheng, China's central bank governor and head of foreign exchange administration

China will continue to guide its financial sector to serve the real economy better while fending off financial risks, said Pan, governor of the People's Bank of China.

The central bank will focus more on cross-cyclical and counter-cyclical adjustments, replenish its monetary policy toolbox, and establish a favorable monetary and financial environment to stabilize prices, promote economic growth, expand employment, and maintain the balance of international payments.

"We have the confidence and capability to ensure the stable operation of the forex market and keep the yuan exchange rate basically stable at reasonable and balanced levels," added Pan, also head of the State Administration of Foreign Exchange.

Work will be done to push forward the yuan's internationalization, promote trade and investment facilitation, and steadily expand the institutional opening up of the financial market.

-- Lan Fo'an, minister of finance

China will enhance the effectiveness of its proactive fiscal policy and implement existing policies well amid efforts to ensure high-quality economic development and defuse local government debt risks, Lan said.

The country will frontload part of its special-purpose local government bond quota set for 2024 and enhance fund management and efficiency.

Efforts will be made to improve fund management and efficiency, and guard against risks. Tighter supervision and fund management throughout all links will be put in place for the special-purpose bonds while strengthening performance management to prevent the funds from staying idle.

CONSUMPTION & TRADE

-- Wang Wentao, minister of commerce

China's consumption has seen both a steady recovery and strengthened momentum this year. It has become stronger as the primary economic driver, Wang said, predicting that the momentum will continue in the

fourth quarter. However, the consumption recovery is still imbalanced, and consumer sentiment has room for further improvement.

China will move to consolidate the upward trend, Wang said, noting that the focus will be on stimulating the purchasing of cars, home appliances, and furniture, as well as consumption in the catering sector.

Despite unstable global economic recovery, China's foreign trade showed strong resilience. It remained stable thanks to an array of government policies that support the development of overseas warehouses, the processing trade, and new energy vehicle exports.

China will accelerate the roll-out of negative lists for services trade and unveil more policies on digital trade reform and innovation. It will also reduce the negative list for foreign investment, remove all restrictions on foreign investment in the manufacturing sector, and open up more service sectors such as telecommunications and tourism.

AGRICULTURAL & INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION

-- Tang Renjian, minister of agriculture and rural affairs

Agricultural work in China has been in good progress, with another bumper harvest expected this year. Autumn grain production, accounting for the lion's share of the annual grain output, is expected to increase and propel the annual grain output to surpass 650 billion kilograms, reaching a new historical peak.

The supply of meat, eggs, milk, vegetables, fruits, and aquatic products is also abundant, Tang said, noting that a stable and safe supply of grain and agricultural products is the foundation for maintaining overall economic and social stability and addressing various risks and challenges.

-- **Jin Zhuanglong, minister of industry and information technology**

"China's industrial system boasts extensive scale and comprehensive categories, with strong resilience and potential," said Jin, adding that with the measures to stabilize the economy taking effect, the upward trend is expected to be further consolidated in the fourth quarter.

Prioritizing fostering new edges, the ministry will draw up action plans for key industries and areas to promote digitalization and advance the building of new information infrastructure such as 5G and gigabit optical networks.

Efforts will also be made to nurture emerging industries, including advanced computing and intelligent

networked vehicles, and take forward steps to map up future industries such as 6G, humanoid robots, and the metaverse.

EMPLOYMENT & HOUSING

-- Wang Xiaoping, minister of human resources and social security

"China's employment situation has generally improved and remained basically stable since the beginning of 2023," Wang said. Employment of young people, including college graduates, was basically stable and continued to improve, and the number of rural migrant workers continued to increase this year.

"We are full of confidence in keeping the employment situation stable in the future as the economic recovery continues to consolidate and positive factors for stabilizing employment keep accumulating," Wang said, adding that more work will be done to promote high-quality and sufficient employment to satisfy people's expectations better.

Work will be done to match supply and demand in the job market by promoting coordinated development of the modern industrial system and human resources and shoring up high-quality technical education and large-scale special training.

Wang put particular emphasis on creating more job opportunities for the youth by strengthening professional training and adjusting education plans as well as supporting young entrepreneurs.

-- Ni Hong, minister of housing and urban-rural development

Since the beginning of the year, a flurry of supportive measures to shore up China's property sector has been rolled out, Ni said. "These policy measures have yielded positive impacts on the sector."

China's property sector is in the process of transformation as major changes have occurred in the relationship between supply and demand in the real estate market.

In response to the new situation, China's property sector should "adhere to the principle that housing is for living in, not for speculation, and meet the essential housing demands of residents and their need for better living conditions."

Significant measures will be adopted to support the construction of affordable housing, the renovation of villages in cities, and public facility construction, as well as meeting reasonable financing demands of developers.

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THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 1-11-2023

MiG-21 jets phased out, Indian Air Force to bring in Mk-IA aircraft as replacement

A former lieutenant-general welcomed the IAF's decision to phase out the Russian-origin fighter jets, which had been haunting the IAF for years due to its abysmal record in flight safety. Owing to its notorious history of accidents, the MiG-21 came to be called "the flying coffin" or "widow-maker"

Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, New Delhi

The Indian Air Force on Tuesday phased out one of its three remaining squadrons of the ageing fleet of Russian- origin MiG-21 fighter jets to be replaced with the indigenous light combat aircraft (LCA) Mk-IA aircraft.

Sources said the MiG-21—India's longest-serving fighter jet will be entirely retired by 2025 and will be replaced by Mk-IA aircraft, which the IAF will start procuring from February.

Each squadron has 16 to 19 fighter planes.

With this, the two MiG-21 squadrons still remain in operation and are currently based at Bikaner and Suratgarh in Rajasthan.

An IAF official said the MiG-21 was inducted into the IAF in the early 1960s and since then 800 variants of the supersonic fighter jets were inducted into service and remained the frontline fighter jet of the force for a long time.

A MiG-21 was in the news on February 27, 2019 after it was shot down by the Pakistani army in an aerial engagement a day after the IAF carried out airstrikes in Pakistan's Balakot. Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman who was flying the jet ejected safely and his parachute drifted into POJ&K where he was taken into custody by the Pakistan Army. He was later released.

A former lieutenant-general welcomed the IAF's decision to phase out the Russian-origin fighter jets, which had been haunting the IAF for years due to its abysmal record in flight safety. Owing to its notorious history of accidents, the MiG-21 came to be called "the flying coffin" or "widow-maker".

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 14-11-2023

Defence Ministry looking at 7,500 specialist trucks

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, The Ministry of Defence is looking to procure two types of trucks. One is a possible order of

2,500 trucks, each capable of carrying 2.5 tonne load and another for 5,000 trucks, each capable of carrying 7.5 tonne load. The MoD has issued a request for information (RFI), which is the first step of the tendering process.

Both the vehicles need to be capable of being used in high altitude, cross country, plains and deserts. The MoD is looking for Indian designed, developed and manufacturing trucks that can be modified for multiple use. For the smaller truck with 2.5 tonne load capacity the MoD also wants it to be troop carrier capable of carrying 14 soldiers with personal weapon and equipment. For the bigger truck that can carry 7.5 tonne load, the MoD wants its use across the three services, including troop carriage capable of carrying 34 soldiers with personal weapon and equipment. It could also be modified as wireless and signal equipment carrying vehicle.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 15-11-2023

Russia's mighty military-industrial empire in decline

The move away from Russian materiel, plagued by low serviceability and crippling maintenance issues, has gathered momentum.

Rahul Bedi

Senior Journalist

THE Indian military's aerial asset profile has in recent years been steadily edging away from Russian fixed-wing combat, transport and surveillance aircraft and assorted rotary-wing platforms to their Western equivalents. Military officers and defence analysts say that this signifies a subtle but veritable 'NATO-isation' of the services' airborne asset profile as India has edged strategically closer to the US and its European Union, Japanese and Australian allies.

The move away from Russian materiel and platforms, plagued by low serviceability and crippling maintenance issues, has gathered momentum over the past 21 months following the US-led sanctions on Moscow for invading Ukraine. These embargoes have adversely impacted Russia's defence-industrial complex, leading to India's further disillusionment with Moscow as neither a reliable and timely kit provider nor a sustained one.

Rosonboronexport, Russia's monopolistic joint stock arms export body, obliquely admitted as much recently when it expressed its inability to continue defence equipment deliveries to its many clients, including India, as it needed to ensure uninterrupted supplies to its own military, presumably to execute its deadlocked offensive in Ukraine.

In its October 19 press note, Rosonboronexport admitted to facing 'pressing challenges' and offered potential clients alternative formats centred on technology partnerships. Indian defence planners rightly interpreted this to mean the 'precipitous decline' of Russia's once mighty military-industrial empire, which, almost singlehandedly, had armed India over five decades. A cross-section of serving and veteran Indian Air Force and Navy fighter and helicopter pilots concurred that the 'golden era' of Soviet, and later Russian, aircraft that began with the induction of MiG-21FL 'Fishbed' combat aircraft in 1963 was ending.

In hindsight, such an outcome was inevitable as Delhi's materiel imports from Russia between 2017 and 2022 had reduced from 62 per cent to 45 per cent, according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. This downturn had grown amid sanctions on Russia as deliveries of equipment to India were interminably delayed, as were spares and technical support for in-service materiel.

A catalogue of India's latest aerial military acquisitions is instructive. The IAF recently procured 36 Dassault Rafale fighters from France in addition to a host of US-origin transport and attack and heavy-lift helicopters. These included 11 Boeing C-17 Globemaster III and 12 Lockheed Martin C-130J-30 air lifters to supplement and eventually replace the IAF's fleet of legacy Soviet-era Antonov An-32s and Ilyushin-76s. Also underway is the induction of 56 C-295MW medium-lift transport aircraft from Airbus Defence and Space to replace the IAF's aged Avro-748M fleet; 16 C-295s are being acquired in a flyaway condition, while 40 are being built at a recently inaugurated facility in Gujarat via a transfer of technology.

In early 2019, the IAF began replacing its dwindling fleet of 8-10 Russian Mil Mi-25/35 attack helicopters with 22 Boeing AH-64E Apache equivalents that were acquired alongside 15 Ch-47F Chinook heavy-lift rotary aircraft. Both models were acquired after besting comparable Russian platforms in user trials.

Notably, India had more or less terminated the 2014-15 \$1.2-billion tender for 200 Russian Kamov Ka-226T 'Hoodlum' light utility helicopters, of which 135 were intended for the Army Aviation Corps and 65 for the IAF. Conversely, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) was on the cusp of signing two 'landmark' deals with the US to locally manufacture General Electric GE-414 jet engines and acquire 31 MQ-9B 'Predator' unmanned aerial vehicles for all three services.

The Navy had also turned its back on MiG-29K/KUB deck-based fighters for INS Vikrant, its newly commissioned aircraft carrier, as these had proven

operationally inefficient and problematic since their induction into service 2009 onwards. The Navy is in advanced negotiations with Dassault to acquire 26 Rafale (Marine) fighters.

The Navy had procured 45 MiG-29/KUBs between 2004 and 2010 for \$2.29 billion, but presently, it operates around 40, almost half of which are believed to be in reserve because of their dismal performance and inability to deliver their declared weapons payload to their stated range with a full fuel load. An excoriating Comptroller and Auditor General's audit had revealed that the MiG-29 K fighters' operational availability between 2014 and 2016 oscillated between a paltry 15.93 per cent and 37.63 per cent, whilst that of twin-seat MiG-29KUB trainers fluctuated between an equally dismal 21.2 per cent and 47.14 per cent.

The Navy also recently retired its Ilyushin IL-38 Sea Dragon long-range maritime patrol aircraft as it already had two non-Russian substitutes in service: 12 Boeing P-8I Neptune anti-submarine warfare long-range maritime multi-mission platforms and 26 German-origin turboprop Dornier Do-228, licence-built by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, while another 12 such examples are on order.

Even the Army is scheduled to begin inducting in early 2024 six Apaches it had signed up to acquire in 2020 for around \$500 million.

Nevertheless, Moscow derives some pecuniary comfort from the reality that some 60 per cent of India's in-service materiel, including fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, are of Russian origin and heavily dependent upon it for spares and sundry technical support. The foremost of these are the IAF's twin-engine Sukhoi Su-30MKI 'Flanker-H' multi-role fighters and around 65 retrofitted MiG-29UPG air-superiority platforms, which together presently constitute the bulk of the IAF's combat squadrons. In September, the MoD had approved the acquisition of 12 HAL-built Su-30MKIs as replacements for an equal number lost in accidents since their induction 2002 onwards.

But suggestively, the IAF had opted to 'sidestep' Russia in upgrading 84 of these Su-30MIs to 'Super Sukhoi' standards and opted to execute the retrofit indigenously. Alongside, the IAF had also exhibited 'disinterest' in evaluating Russia's offer of MiG-35 'Fulcrum' and Su-35 'Flanker-E' fighters for its proposed tender to acquire 114 multi-role fighter aircraft (MRFA). Both Russian offers are believed to have evoked little or no enthusiasm at Air Headquarters, portending the end of an epoch monopolised by Soviet and Russian combat aircraft.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 8-11-2023

**India successfully test-fires 'Pralay'
short-range ballistic missile off**

Odisha coast

Pralay' is a 350-500 km short-range, surface-to-surface missile with a payload capacity of 500-1,000 kg

PTI, Balasore (Odisha)

India on Tuesday successfully test-fired its surface-to-surface short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) 'Pralay' from the Abdul Kalam Island off the Odisha coast, a Defence official said.

The missile has been developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) in view of the country's defence requirements along its borders with neighbouring China and Pakistan, he said.

The missile, launched around 9.50 am, met all its mission objectives, the official said, adding that a battery of tracking instruments monitored its trajectory along the coastline.

'Pralay' is a 350-500 km short-range, surface-to-surface missile with a payload capacity of 500-1,000 kg. The solid-fuel, battlefield missile is based on the Prithvi Defence Vehicle.

Pralay' has been developed for deployment along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and Line of Control (LoC), he said.

He said 'Pralay' missile can be compared with China's 'Dong Feng 12' and Russia's 'Iskander', which was used in the ongoing war with Ukraine. Pakistan also has tactical ballistic missiles in its defence system.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 8-11-2023

**ISRO's Aditya L1 solar mission captures
first high-energy X-ray glimpse of solar
flares**

The recorded data is consistent with the X-ray light curves provided by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA)

PTI, Bengaluru

ISRO's maiden solar mission, Aditya L1, has captured its first high energy X-ray glimpse of solar flares.

During its first observation period from approximately October 29, the High Energy L1 Orbiting X-ray Spectrometer (HEL1OS) on board Aditya-L1 spacecraft has recorded the impulsive phase of solar flares, the space agency said in a statement on Tuesday.

A solar flare is a sudden brightening of solar atmosphere.

The recorded data is consistent with the X-ray light curves provided by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellites (GOES).

"Commissioned on October 27, 2023, HEL1OS is currently undergoing fine-tuning of thresholds and calibration operations. The instrument is set to monitor the Sun's high-energy X-ray activity with fast timing and high-resolution spectra," it said.

HEL1OS data enables researchers to study explosive energy release and electron acceleration during impulsive phases of solar flares.

HEL1OS was developed by the Space Astronomy Group of the U R Rao Satellite Centre, ISRO, Bengaluru, the agency added.

HEL1OS, the hard X-ray spectrometer on Aditya-L1 Solar Mission by ISRO, is the harbinger of flaring activities on the Sun, with the ability to capture the early impulsive phase of the solar activity.

According to ISRO, flares produce enhanced emission in all wavelengths across the electromagnetic spectrum – radio, optical, UV, soft X-rays, hard X-rays and gamma-rays. Flare emission consists of emissions from accelerated particles and hot plasma.

Aditya-L1 spacecraft is designed for providing remote observations of the solar corona and in-situ observations of the solar wind at L1 (Sun-Earth Lagrangian point), which is about 1.5 million kilometres from the Earth.

It is the first dedicated Indian space mission for observations of the Sun. Aimed at studying the Sun from an orbit around the L1, the mission carries seven payloads to observe the photosphere, chromosphere and the outermost layers of the Sun, the corona, in different wavebands.

Aditya-L1 is a fully indigenous effort with the participation of national institutions.

An ISRO scientist told PTI that capturing the first High-Energy X-ray glimpse of Solar Flares is an indication that the mission is so far doing well on the expected lines.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 3-11-2023

UN PEACEKEEPING MISSIONS

**Armed Forces earned
Tk 27,941cr in 23 yrs**

Staff Correspondent

Bangladesh Armed Forces have earned a total Tk 27,941 crore by participating in different UN peacekeeping missions abroad in the 23 fiscal years since 2000-01.

Law Minister Anisul Huq, who is in charge of the defence ministry in parliament, gave the figures in the House yesterday while replying to a tabled question of ruling Awami League MP Habibur Rahman from Bogura-5.

Habibur Rahman wanted to know about the amount of foreign currencies the Armed Forces of Bangladesh have earned so far through participating in the peacekeeping missions and how much foreign remittances the government has received.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 4-11-2023

SLAF Air Symposium 2023:

Fostering Shared Air Interests in the IOR

Dishan Joseph

The Asian security discourse often overlooks the evolving role of the Indian Ocean in setting the future courses of international relations, trade, and security. This is a water mass bounded on the west by East Africa, on the north by the Indian subcontinent, on the east by Indochina and Australia, and on the south by the Southern Ocean off the coast of Antarctica. The Indian Ocean is the world's third-largest ocean and constitutes about 20 per cent of the water on the Earth's surface. Although the economic and political views towards the Indian Ocean vary, its critical strategic importance linking the global power game has begun over the past two decades.

The Colombo Air Symposium 2023 stands as a pivotal event in the realm of air power discussions in the region. Since its inception in 2015, it has consistently evolved to become a platform for in-depth scholarly debates. This year's theme, "Fostering Shared Air Interests in the IOR: Geopolitical Cooperation, Complexities, and Compulsions," delves into the growing influence of regionalism in the current geopolitical landscape. This forum was attended by the UK, US, Japan, Netherlands, India, Palestine, Egypt and many more representatives from different nations.

The symposium emphasized the significance of state and non-state actors pooling resources and achieving interoperability to safeguard national interests through mutually beneficial cooperation. However, it acknowledged that geopolitical tensions and complex strategic structures require meticulous consideration in multilateral and bilateral relations. The compounding of national and regional interests also extended to the air

domain, where militaries and other stakeholders seek to align their goals through coordination and cooperation.

Complex Dynamics in the Indian Ocean Region

This is a region where the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Chinese-led Belt Road Initiative, and the Maritime Silk Route converge and diverge, paving the way for these two countries to exercise absolute strategic advantages over one another. China has been making increased forays into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in the interests of energy security and trade. India is building its naval assets and maritime surveillance capabilities to counter the growing threat of China in the Indian Ocean Region. The complex interplay among the politics of the sea, geopolitics, and geo-economics shows the rise of a new power game in the Indian Ocean.

Sri Lanka is situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean. In the world of antiquity, ancient Ceylon represented a cross-pollinated land of convergence. There are overlaps between maritime security and national security; marine security and environmental security, offshore security (OSC) and national defence. The role of non-state actors and environmental threats pose high stake threats to the IOR countries, and no single country can act as a net security provider for the IORA region. The Indian Ocean is governed through a number of ratifications of maritime agreements. The Indian Ocean comes with a mix of geo-strategic interests and geo-economic realities. Most nations are focused on achieving an acceptable standard of living for their people through the development of industry, trade and commerce.

Preventing piracy, smuggling of illegal drugs, especially methamphetamine pills, illegal human trafficking, illegal trespassing, and cross-border terrorism has become critical security issues. Safety, security, and pollution prevention are of the utmost importance for maritime transport. Terrorist threats show no signs of decreasing, and both ships and ports may continue to face the threat of terrorist acts.

IORA Apart from maritime piracy and terrorism, illicit maritime trades and trafficking are on the rise too. The Indian Ocean region is viewed increasingly through the prism of strategic competition and power rivalry. In October 2023, Sri Lanka assumed the IORA Chair and presented its theme as 'Strengthening Regional Architecture: Reinforcing Indian Ocean Identity'. This presents Sri Lanka's vision and mission for IORA and its partner countries. The concept of IORA originated with the vision of President Nelson Mandela (during his

visit to India in 1995). His vision encapsulated the 'concept of an Indian Ocean Rim for socio-economic cooperation'.

Regional Cooperation and Air Power Dynamics

It was realised with the founding of IORA in 1997 as an inter-governmental organisation formed to foster regional economic cooperation. Sri Lanka had and continues to have its share of maritime terrorism, interstate dispute/illegal fishing, trafficking narcotics, humans and artefacts, including environmental crimes (e.g. oil spills). It is understood that fisheries management should be at the core of the new maritime policy, which IORA should strengthen and develop to build mutual understanding among all decision-makers.

We witness an age where all leading nations and even smaller ones, routinely exploit air power as a significant instrument of national power. Air power is the integrated employment of all air and space forces to control and exploit the air and space environments to achieve national security objectives. Winston Churchill once said "Airpower is the most difficult of all forms of military force to measure, or even express in precise terms". Air power has certain capabilities that result directly from its characteristics of speed, range, and elevation. Air power can concentrate non-lethal power globally through mobility to position forces and equipment, through responsiveness to provide presence, and through perspective to maintain awareness. Air power remained a rather understudied area in the Indo-Pacific region, which is primarily a naval domain.

The Air Force ensures the nation's ability "to do something in the air." The strengths of air power are based on its ability to exploit the characteristics of speed, range, and elevation. The fundamental strengths of Air Force air power are: 1) air superiority, 2) reliable global mobility, 3) rapid global employment, and 4) acute global awareness. What does influence and shape mean for an air force? It would mean the employment of the non-combat assets in providing humanitarian assistance in times of natural calamities; the use of high-end air power capabilities to demonstrate intent and employing the reach, responsiveness and penetration of air power to respond and contain emerging challenges to the nation's or region's strategic interests.

The symposium was organised around five sub-themes: airspace management, challenges and opportunities for air power, socioeconomic considerations in air power applications, the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment and regional coherence and interdependence. These sub-themes

reflect the diverse areas of scholarly and practical interest. The symposium presented research articles and academic inquiries that delve deeply into the regionalist approach in the IOR and beyond, with a particular focus on the developing states and their capabilities to protect the national interests in airspace, maritime, economic, and geopolitical domains.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 15-11-2023

Commander says Army possesses cutting-edge equipment

TEHRAN - A senior commander has proudly proclaimed the possession of the most advanced and cutting-edge military equipment by the Iranian Army.

"Today, in defiance of all sanctions, we stand independently, providing our essential defense equipment," Deputy Army Chief for Coordination Rear Admiral Sayyari told reporters on Tuesday.

Emphasizing the pivotal role of human resources, particularly in a military context, Sayyari underscored that personnel represent the most critical asset for any organization. He argued that proficient human resources empower organizations to deliver the most effective response to threats.

Admiral Sayyari proudly declared that, amidst adversities, the army's qualitative human force has successfully acquired the best and most modern equipment, showcasing the nation's resilience and self-reliance.

He cited the Leader of the Islamic Revolution who had previously warned that possessing the best equipment without the qualitative force to utilize them would lead to inevitable loss.

The admiral emphasized that the world continues to be captivated by the successful Iranian military operations over the past decades, with their lessons now integrated into university teachings.

Despite the challenges posed by sanctions, the Iranian Army, as highlighted by Admiral Sayyari, maintains its independence in supplying necessary defense equipment. This accomplishment, he underscored, is a testament to the empowering slogan, "we can," driven by the nation's qualitative human resources.

Iran has witnessed a surge in the export of military equipment in recent years. Experts believe that this global outreach not only enhances Iran's strategic influence but also solidifies its position as a significant player in the international defense market. The ability to provide cutting-edge equipment, both domestically and

internationally, seems to have positioned the Iranian military as a formidable force, showcasing the nation's commitment to self-sufficiency and excellence in the defense sector.

In the complex landscape of global geopolitics, Iran's achievements in the military sector are believed to underscore its capacity to navigate challenges as a self-reliant force, both at home and on the international stage. This narrative of resilience and success appears to have resonated both within and outside the country's borders.

- MAS/PA

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 7-11-2023

Tehran criticizes IAEA double standards on Iran's nuclear program

TEHRAN – The deputy chief of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) has condemned the double standards of the International Atomic Energy (IAEA), saying the body allows Western countries to politicize nuclear energy and use it as a political tool.

“Nuclear technology is a scientific and technical matter, but it has been politicized in regards to Iran,” noted Pezhman Shirmardi on Monday.

He said that Iran is the country with the most comprehensive cooperation with the IAEA. But that hasn't stopped the organization from pursuing more ways to impose restrictions on Iran's peaceful nuclear program.

“Nuclear energy, according to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), belongs to everyone and any country can have peaceful nuclear activities. However, the IAEA imposes more restrictions and surveillance on our country, which is seeking peaceful nuclear energy to solve societal problems.”

The nuclear official added that there are absolutely no inspections of the nuclear activities of the Israeli regime. He said, unlike Iran, Israel is not a signatory to the NTP, and that has allowed it to have as many nuclear warheads as it desires.

“There is a double standard in dealing with countries regarding nuclear issues. All of Iran's nuclear activities are in the path of peace. But we are under intense inspections by the Agency. On the other hand, the regime has no commitments and there is no oversight,” the AEOI deputy director stressed.

He also pointed to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the U.S. and asked why Washington has never been held accountable for its use of weapons

of mass destruction. “Many Western countries began to develop nuclear weapons after those events,” he said.

Shirmardi also underlined that Iran is planning to use nuclear energy to fulfill several of the country's needs. According to the official, Iran's nuclear technology will especially help the nation strengthen its capabilities in the fields of agriculture and medicine.

- MHA/PA

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 15-11-2023

Pakistan signed contracts with US firms for arms sales to Ukraine: report

Dawn Report

KARACHI: Pakistan entered into agreements worth \$364 million to sell arms with two private US military companies last year. These weapons were allegedly sent to Ukraine for its war with Russia, BBC Urdu has claimed.

According to the report published on Monday, the contracts were signed with “Global Military” and “Northrop Grumman” for the sale of 155mm shells.

According to the Pakistan Ordnance Factory, the shells could be fired from artillery Howitzer M1, M1A1, M114, M-198 and M-109 A2.

Citing details of the contracts from the American Federal Procurement Data System, the report claimed these weapons were bought from Pakistan. The contracts were signed in August 2022 and specifically linked to the purchase of 155mm shells.

It added that a \$232m contract was awarded to Global Military while another \$131m contract was signed with Northrop Grumman. “These agreements expired last month, i.e. October 2023,” BBC Urdu said.

The report alleged that the deliveries were made in a British military cargo plane which landed at the Nur Khan Airbase in Rawalpindi five times.

“Each time, the plane flew from Nur Khan Airbase to the British military base in Cyprus and then to Romania, that too at a time when Russia was waging war in Romania's neighbouring country Ukraine,” BBC Urdu claimed.

It also shared State Bank of Pakistan data showing that the country's arms exports increased by 3,000 per cent during FY2022-23.

“Pakistan exported arms worth \$13m in 2021-22, while these exports reached \$415m in 2022-23,” it stated.

The report also quoted a document of the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which is a US

Department of Defence funding programme designed to increase Ukraine's defence capability against Russia.

The claims of ammunition supplied by Pakistan being used on the battlefield by Ukraine have been made in the past as well.

But the Foreign Office denied any sale of arms and ammunition to Ukraine, saying Pakistan maintained a "strict neutrality" policy in the dispute between the two countries and did not provide them with any arms or ammunition in that context.

In an opinion piece for the Washington Post earlier this year, caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar denied these allegations. He, however, alluded that the weapons might have found their way on the battlefield through the black market.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 14-11-2023

Joint Naval Drills

Joint naval exercises between partner countries and allies are a reaffirmation of sustained defence cooperation. Like all other areas, Pakistan and China work together in naval defence as well and ongoing joint drills are proof of that. Week-long drills are taking place in the Arabian Sea and for the first time, Joint Maritime Patrols will be a part of these joint exercises. China's key security interests in the Indo-Pacific vis a vis the United States make such joint endeavours even more significant.

Recently, the Russian Pacific Fleet carried out its first-ever joint naval exercise with Myanmar. This is important because the Indo-Pacific front remains the US's vital security interest. Add to that the fact that Russia-Myanmar exercises were held in the sea that the US regards significant in safeguarding its interests in the Indian Ocean. This whole scenario makes the ongoing China-Pakistan drills very strategic in importance. Russia and China are the US's rival block in the Indo-Pacific and while China and Pakistan's joint exercises are routine, the Russia-Myanmar naval cooperation is a new happening in the complicated politics of the Ocean.

The US seeks to balance and preserve its interests by joining hands with India. Moscow's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean is definitely worrying for the US.

Though the recent defence talks between India and the US do not make an overt mention of that, it is plausible to assume that Russia-Myanmar joint naval venture must have surfaced in the talks. Emerging alliances

(Russia-Myanmar) as well as deepening naval defence cooperation between enduring partners (China-Pakistan Joint Maritime Patrol) is a tough competition for the US. While the sea-scape and control of the seas have been predicted to cause major conflicts, a particular restraint has been practised by all parties all these years. China remains largely pacifist and the US has gradually sought to strengthen its partnerships in the proximity because it does not have the benefit of geography in this case. Also, China's enduring reliance on and cooperation with Pakistan in naval defence makes the latter a trustworthy defence partner

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 13-11-2023

PLA Army's tactical ballistic missile believed to have debuted

By Liu Xuanzun

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Army is believed to have commissioned a type of tactical ballistic missile, which made its public debut during a recent exercise, according to observers.

In the undated exercise, the 71st Group Army of the PLA Army fired live munitions in the Gobi Desert in northwestern China, the army group said via its official Sina Weibo account on Friday.

According to photos attached to the post, the PLA Army's latest long-range modularized rocket launcher system that made its first public appearance at the national day military parade on October 1, 2019 was part of the exercise.

While some photos show the live-fire shooting of rockets, one of the photos show the firing of two projectiles that are clearly larger and thicker than rockets, with observers commenting that these projectiles are likely not rockets, but tactical ballistic missiles.

It is likely that the PLA Army's modularized rocket launcher system can launch tactical ballistic missiles, because an export version of this rocket launcher system, the AR-3, has the capability, a military expert who requested anonymity told the Global Times on Sunday.

China has exhibited the AR-3 multiple rocket launcher system at various domestic and overseas defense expos.

Thanks to the modularized design, the AR-3 can switch munitions it fires, including 300mm and 370mm rockets and 750mm tactical ballistic missiles, state-owned China North Industries Group Corp (NORINCO), the developer of the weapon, revealed at the defense expos.

The Sina Weibo post by the 71st Group Army did not elaborate on the munitions featured in the exercise, and there is currently no other official announcement on the commissioning of the tactical ballistic missile into the PLA Army.

If the PLA Army indeed commissioned tactical ballistic missiles, it would significantly increase its long-range precision strike capabilities, as such missiles are more powerful and reach longer ranges than guided rockets, the expert said, noting that it would also greatly increase the PLA Army's deterrence.

In the joint military exercise that encircled the island of Taiwan after then-US House speaker Nancy Pelosi provocatively visited the island in August 2022, the PLA Army deployed the long-range modularized rocket launcher system and fired rockets across the Taiwan Straits. Ballistic missiles were fired over the island, but by the PLA Rocket Force, not the PLA Army.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 3-11-2023

China, US to hold arms control and non-proliferation consultations

By GT Staff Reporters

China and the US will hold arms control and non-proliferation consultations at the director-general's level in Washington DC next week. The Chinese delegation will be led by the head of the Department of Arms Control of China's Foreign Ministry, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said at a regular press briefing on Thursday.

As we mentioned the other day about the visit to the US by Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, China and the US agreed to hold a number of consultations soon including on arms control and non-proliferation, an area in which China stays in close contact with the world's major countries, said Wang Wenbin.

According to the agreed agenda, our two sides will exchange views on a wide range of issues such as the implementation of international arms control treaties and non-proliferation, the spokesperson noted.

The US wants to engage in nuclear arms control consultations with China to assess China's nuclear capabilities and prevent the development of new nuclear forces, Song Zhongping, a Chinese military expert and TV commentator, told the Global Times on Thursday.

The US is currently upgrading its nuclear triad, as it is concerned about other countries surpassing its own capabilities. Therefore, the US hopes to use nuclear

negotiations to prevent other countries from developing, rather than genuinely seeking global nuclear strategic balance, Song said.

The upcoming consultations between the two sides come after the US Department of Defense released a report on China's military development last month, which speculated on a major expansion of China's nuclear arsenal, as the Pentagon claimed that China now has more than 500 nukes and possibly double that to more than 1,000 by 2030.

On October 25, Wu Qian, a spokesperson for the Ministry of National Defense, criticized the US report for its disregard of facts and distortion of China's national defense policy and military strategy. The report wildly speculates on China's military development in the nuclear, space, and cyber domains, and interferes in China's internal affairs on the Taiwan question, Wu said.

China has to build a strong military in the face of a severe and complex international security environment, and the Chinese military will never remain idle while the country's sovereignty, security, and development interests are at risk, and will never allow anyone or any force to invade or split China, Wu said. He noted that China's military development "targets no specific countries or objectives" and is "legitimate, legal, reasonable and moderate."

China has always maintained its nuclear forces at the minimum level necessary for national security and has always committed to maintaining global strategic security, however, the US is manipulating the "nuclear" issue, playing with "nuclear double standards" as an excuse to expand its nuclear arsenal and maintain military hegemony, Wu stressed.

Song noted that the number of China's nuclear weapons is nowhere near the level as that of the US and Russia.

"It's fine to exchange views, but the US is in no position to pressure China," Song said.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry stressed in a press briefing in May that "China is firmly committed to a defensive nuclear strategy and the only nuclear weapon state to pledge 'no first use' of nuclear weapons and not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones."

It is hoped that the US will abandon its expansion of global hegemony through providing so-called nuclear umbrellas to other countries and commit to a "no first use" policy, making the world a peaceful place, Song said.