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CONTENTS

| | | |
|-------------|--|-----------|
| I. | Foreign Affairs | 1 |
| II. | Economic, Cultural and Social Affairs | 15 |
| III. | Internal Affairs | 29 |

I - FOREIGN AFFAIRS

| | Subject | Newspapers/Periodicals | Date | Page |
|-----|---|-----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| | INDIA The US, India, and China | | | |
| 1. | Joe Biden's China plan and India's role By Yashwant Raj | The Hindustan Times, New Delhi | 14-12-2020 | 1 |
| 2. | China wants India to accept the new normal on LAC, move on to restore bilateral ties By Shishir Gupta | The Hindustan Times, New Delhi | 13-12-2020 | 1 |
| 3. | LAC deadlock continues By Ashok K Mehta | The Hindustan Times, New Delhi | 3-12-2020 | 2 |
| 4. | China says working with India for further easing of border tensions - PTI India and West Asia | The Tribune, Chandigarh | 8-12-2020 | 3 |
| 5. | West Asian outreach Editorial | The Pioneer, New Delhi | 8-12-2020 | 4 |
| 6. | Pak arbitrarily transferred management of Kartarpur Sahib Gurudwara, violated UNGA resolution: India - PTI Indian Foreign Policy | The Pioneer, New Delhi | 3-12-2020 | 4 |
| 7. | Bilateralism versus multilateralism By S Shaji AFGHANISTAN | The Indian Express, New Delhi | 13-12-2020 | 5 |
| 8. | Kabul, Abu Dhabi agree to boost cooperation - Pajhwok BANGLADESH | Afghanistan Times, Kabul | 15-12-2020 | 6 |
| 9. | Mitigating Covid Impact: PM for stronger cooperation - UNB | The Daily Star, Dhaka | 7-12-2020 | 6 |
| 10. | US interested in development plans for CTG Port - UNB NEPAL | The Bangladesh Observer, Dhaka | 15-12-2020 | 7 |
| 11. | Recent high-level visits from China and India were fruitful' By Agencies | Spotlight, Kathmandu | 4-12-2020 | 7 |

| | | | | |
|-----|--|----------------------------------|------------|----|
| 12. | Foreign Policy 2020 Bundle of Jargons By Keshab Prasad Poudel | Spotlight, Kathmandu | 14-12-2020 | 8 |
| 13. | Chinese defense minister's visit security concern By Staff Correspondent | Spotlight, Kathmandu | 15-12-2020 | 10 |
| 14. | The business of foreign affairs By Sujeev Shakya SRI LANKA | The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu | 15-12-2020 | 11 |
| 15. | SL - Japan - India in touch to develop Eastern Container Terminal (ECT) By Kelum Bandara PAKISTAN | Daily Mirror, Colombo | 10-12-2020 | 12 |
| 16. | Foreign policy goals Editorial | The Nation, Islamabad | 2-12-2020 | 12 |
| 17. | India shamed over anti-Pakistan disinformation network By Iftikhar A. Khan | Dawn, Islamabad | 11-12-2020 | 13 |
| 18. | A restoration in ties? By Saman Rizwan | The News, Islamabad | 14-12-2020 | 14 |

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 14-12-2020

Joe Biden's China plan and India's role

Yashwant Raj

Indians anxious about Biden need not worry. Biden's China plan is far more strategic than his predecessor's approach

United States (US) President-elect Joe Biden has a China plan and India has a role in it. Though it may look as if it begins by making Chinese president Xi Jinping sweat for his return call — Xi sent Biden a congratulatory message but they haven't spoken — there is a lot more to it.

Biden has not spoken about his China policy in a full-fledged foreign policy address yet, but he did lift the veil somewhat in an interview to Thomas Friedman of The New York Times, addressing a whole range of top-of-the-mind foreign policy issues.

Indians anxious about Biden need not worry. Biden's China plan is far more strategic than his predecessor's approach that went from criticising China to coddling of Xi — Donald Trump made his young granddaughter sing for the visiting leader — to a full-fledged trade war to a trade pact to daily China-bashing in the wake of the pandemic that ultimately consumed Trump's presidency.

From Biden's comments to NYT, there are key takeaways.

One, Biden will not do anything immediately to undo the 25% tariff on imports from China, imposed by Trump. Two, Biden intends to carry out a full review of the relationship and develop a strategy in consultation with allies in Asia and Europe. "The best China strategy, I think, is one which gets every one of our — or at least what used to be our — allies on the same page," he said in the interview. "It's going to be a major priority for me in the opening weeks of my presidency to try to get us back on the same page with our allies."

Three, Biden will seek to shift the focus of trade policy from Trump's deficit reduction to "actually produce progress on China's abusive practices" of forced transfer of technology, theft of intellectual property, and bolstering Chinese corporations with subsidies. Four, he aims to bulk up the US's capacity to fight by investing in research, infrastructure and education. "I want to make sure we're going to fight like hell by investing in America first."

The underlying approach in Biden's remarks was consistent with what his aides were saying even before his victory. Biden would be "investing in ourselves, renewing our democracy, working with our close partners like India, asserting our value and engaging China from a position of strength", Antony Blinken, the nominee for secretary of state, had said at an outreach to Indian-Americans in August. He had added, it needs to be noted, "India has to be a key partner in that effort".

The president-elect and Prime Minister Narendra Modi discussed the Indo-Pacific region — another term for the threat from China — in their call on November 17, their first after Biden's victory. But clearly, New Delhi will look for an early and explicit expression of acknowledgment of

this commonality of goal and purpose, and with a sense of urgency because of the growing Chinese aggression in the neighbourhood.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 13-12-2020

China wants India to accept the new normal on LAC, move on to restore bilateral ties

Shishir Gupta

While India wants China to restore status quo ante of April 2020, Beijing apparently feels that Modi government will come to terms with the new normal on LAC and revive ties in the coming months and willy-nilly accept the rise of the Middle Kingdom.

Chinese soldiers armed with spears and rifles, which were used during the Galwan Valley clash in June.

This month, External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has made repeated public statements stating that the only way for restoring frozen India-China ties is to untangle the four friction points in East Ladakh by disengaging and de-escalating the military situation along the 1597 km Line of Actual Control (LAC).

The Chinese on their part are indicating that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has established a new normal in East Ladakh by transgression and India should move to restoring bilateral ties by accepting the new LAC. Beijing wants India and China to celebrate 70 years of establishment of bilateral ties and move to restore economic ties. That boundary dispute should be kept separate and resolution parallel to growth in economic ties has been the Chinese narrative since the days of Deng Xiaoping.

While the previous Indian regimes believed that being soft to the PLA on border was a sure recipe for a peaceful and tranquil LAC, this was taken a sign of weakness by the Beijing rulers who time and again tried to change the unresolved line from Shaksgam Valley in Karakoram to Kibithu in far east Arunachal Pradesh. Even junior diplomats from China heckled India for referring to Tibet and Xinjiang or on Indian leaders travelling to Arunachal Pradesh. Buddhism teacher and 14th Dalai Lama was called a terrorist by China but Pakistani Masood Azhar, a terrorist who has spilled the blood of hundreds in India, was a religious-political activist as Beijing blocked his designation as global terrorist no less than four times.

Maybe PLA expects Indian Army to accept the new normal after looking at the roadmap of New Delhi's relations with Beijing's iron brother Pakistan over decades, where India has always come around to the dialogue table after every crisis. Indian resilience is seen as a sign of weakness.

Today 19 years ago, five Pakistani terrorists of Masood Azhar's Jaish-e-Mohammed group struck at Indian Parliament while it was in winter session killing nine security personnel and civilians. Much as we have tried to

gloss over the event, the brutal fact is that had the terrorists managed to gun their way into the Houses in session, the entire Indian political leadership would have been held hostage by radicalised thugs. The national humiliation of such an event would have made look the 1999 hijacking of IC-814 flight to Kandahar and subsequent release of three top Islamist terrorists including Azhar in lieu of over 170 passengers a trifle. Yet, in January 2004, India started the dialogue with Pakistan, who again gave a facile commitment that it would not allow its territory by terrorists to target India.

One thought that the 26/11 Mumbai massacre would have been the turning point for India-Pakistan relations with this time Pakistan's other terror export Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) gunning down innocents in the heart of India's commercial capital. Despite nearly 200 innocents getting butchered in Mumbai, there was no retaliation from India with so-called strategists buying the Pakistani narrative of an imminent nuclear war. This time again, dialogue with Pakistani was resumed in 2010 with counter-terrorism, Mumbai attack trials and humanitarian issues added to the menu.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi called it a day on Pakistan after January 2016 attack on Pathankot airbase by Azhar's Islamist troopers again. Had it not been for alert Indian security agencies led by National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, India would have been humiliated again if the terrorists had managed to blow parked MiG-21 Bison fighters to smithereens. Not only all the fighters were removed from the airbase but even the then Pakistani NSA Naseer Janjua was informed about the impending attack on January 1 night itself. Documents found on the terrorists indicated that the attack had been given a green signal, the day PM Modi impromptu landed in Lahore on December 25, 2015 in a genuine effort to promote ties with Islamabad.

The June 15 Galwan Valley skirmish in which men of 16 Bihar led by Col Santosh Babu retaliated to the PLA aggression on the LAC is one such tipping point with China. On that day, India lost 20 of its brave soldiers including Col Santosh Babu in Galwan Valley as they were overwhelmed in numbers by the aggressive PLA soldiers armed with barbed wire sticks and spears. The Indian soldiers retaliated in full measure with the adversary PLA losing more men in the hand to hand fight including their own commanding officer. Hopefully, the Indian Army will honour the brave Santosh Babu and four other personnel on 2021 Republic Day.

While India wants China to restore status quo ante of April 2020, Beijing apparently feels that the Modi government will come to terms with the new normal on LAC and revive ties in the coming months and willy-nilly accept the rise of the Middle Kingdom. After all, the so-called tiger ASEAN nations have consigned the Chinese aggression in the South China Sea to merely a talking point on bilateral agenda with Beijing. Prime Minister Narendra Modi should not even entertain such a thought.

THE PIONEER, NEW DELHI 3-12-2020

LAC deadlock continues

Ashok K Mehta

Modi has been tricked by the Chinese and misled by his civilian advisors into letting the guard down and creating a deficit of capability

The 870-km Line of Actual Control (LAC) in East Ladakh is now in a state of stalemate after China gobbled up Indian territory. The prospects of any disengagement by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) are receding even as Beijing has reportedly created a model village intruding into Bhutanese territory near the disputed Doklam plateau. Last week, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh was the Government's senior-most Minister at the prestigious Hindustan Times Leadership Summit that was held virtually this year. What a disappointment he was! During the Q&A, he kept dodging the questions with vague answers on the state of play along the LAC that was tantamount to suppressing information on the Chinese aggression. To his credit though, he did pledge that the Modi Government will not allow an inch of land to be grabbed or let the ground situation change unilaterally when both have become fait accompli.

On whether Rafale was a game changer, he skipped the question, saying that he would let experts answer it, though he did travel to France to do a "shastra puja" while inducting it into the IAF. In sharp contrast, while dealing with Pakistan, he was a tiger. That, in brief, is India's tragic two-front predicament – fragile and unsustainable, given the absence of a strategic vision that has been compounded by the economic downturn.

In mid-October, the Chinese had made a conditional proposal for a limited disengagement from north and south banks of Pangong Lake, asking India to vacate Chushul heights on Kailash range first in exchange of their withdrawal from the Fingers area. Apparently, India either rejected it or sought clarification, considering the strategic utility attached to the Kailash range. During the ninth round of integrated civil military dialogue, there was no word from China as India is keen that PLA returns to its original pre-May positions. That clearly is not happening. China watchers have reported that PLA commanders have had a rethink on the Pangong Lake – a specific disengagement proposal, which reflects a perceived PLA weakness, following the Special Frontier Force's occupation of commanding heights overlooking PLA assets. Further, PLA border guards and military, who are not properly acclimatised and accustomed to occupying posts on the LAC and on heights opposite the Kailash range, are likely to confront severe "winterisation woes." The strategic advantage gained by India through the pre-emptive commando action in August is well established. The Chinese feel that they can live with it as they know India will not exploit the military advantage. Still, the Indian Army's vast experience in Siachen, Kargil and other high altitude posts gives it an advantage over the

PLA. Both sides are substantially deployed on the LAC for the first time and will face extreme weather problems.

According to high-resolution satellite maps from MAXAR Technologies, hardened ammunition bunkers have been constructed 2 km from Sinche-la Pass on the Bhutan-China border, which are connected to an all-weather-road that stretches 5 km across the Doklam plateau. A village named Pangdon has come up 2 km inside Bhutan, which is connected to a 9 km track adjacent to Doklam on territory that Bhutan claims. A September 2020 study by STRATFOR, the world's leading intelligence and geopolitical platform, says that after the Doklam crisis in 2017, when China was forced by Indian troops to stop constructing a road on the disputed land, it was compelled to double its military infrastructure, including helipads and air bases. After the Doklam standoff was defused, the Chinese merely suspended road construction for a few months and later resumed building the road towards Jampheri Ridge in Bhutan but not on the disputed India-China-Bhutan trijunction that India had blocked. The study says that the PLA military activity is camouflaged by creating civilian projects near LAC, which can double up for military use and these areas are off limits for the local population. This latest intrusion is near Torsa river on Doklam plateau, which is an Indian red line.

The Bhutanese Ambassador to India, Vetsop Namgyel, said: "There is no Chinese village inside Bhutan. Satellite images show some settlement near the standoff point, Doklam. The village is not on the Bhutanese side." A Government source said that we would come in only when the PLA intrudes and leaves Bhutan to handle civilian intrusions. The Chinese Government television network producer Shen Shiwei was the first to show the village but later removed it. The Chinese have mastered the art of keeping military intrusions disguised as civil settlements and have done it in Nepal as well. The Indian Army's gateway Doklam post must keep an eagle eye as it will be the first responder if the PLA crosses the red line again.

Clearly, the Chinese are creating new pressure points on the LAC as India starts demonstrating its options in hand, which it can enlarge and militarise as part of the progress in Indo-Pacific strategy, especially in the Indian Ocean Region. As India is seriously outmatched along its northern borders and the LAC, it is working on enhancing its maritime deterrence focussed on China's Malacca dilemma. Every day, six to seven giant Chinese tankers sail through the Indian Ocean carrying 10 million barrels of oil. The challenge for India is in making the Chinese feel the heat of their Malacca dilemma through a countervailing strategy, through which escalation can be managed.

Despite the Government's whitewash of PLA intrusions, some lessons, not new, are evident: Bolstering early warning and surveillance of PLA activities with real time intelligence from US, now that the four foundational agreements have been signed. This will stop our forces from "being surprised." We must monitor Chinese behaviour as distinct from their military activities and

occupy commanding heights pre-emptively. Galwan was not held and had it been occupied, it would have provided an additional bargaining chip. Counter intrusions should be swiftly executed as was done in 2013 at Chumar to offset the Depsang encroachment. The Chinese are firmly ensconced at Depsang again and are refusing to budge.

Last month, President Xi Jinping asked the PLA to be battle-ready. This month, he urged the PLA to transition from battle readiness to winning the war. India's self-inflicted LAC injuries are being camouflaged by a Government blessed with an overwhelming political mandate but it still won't allow the LAC issue to be discussed in Parliament freely. Nehru, the former Prime Minister that this Government trashes, led a flourishing debate in Parliament on the Aksai Chin hara-kiri. Modi is one of the most charismatic and performance-proof Prime Ministers India has had. He too has been tricked by the Chinese and misled by his civilian advisors into letting the guard down and creating capability deficit by painting a no-war setting.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 8-12-2020

China says working with India for further easing of border tensions

PTI

Nearly 50,000 troops of the Indian Army are deployed in various mountainous locations in eastern Ladakh

China and India are in close communication to further ease tensions in eastern Ladakh and both sides will hold consultations over specific arrangements for the next round of talks, a senior Chinese official said on Tuesday.

The Chinese and Indian armies held the 8th round of Corps Commander-level meeting on November 6 to resolve the border standoff that erupted in early May.

Asked when the next round of talks will be held, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying told a media briefing here that China and India have been in "close communication on the border issue through diplomatic and military channels to further ease tensions." "The two sides will hold consultations over specific arrangements for further talks on the basis of acting on existing consensus reached through previous talks," she said.

Nearly 50,000 troops of the Indian Army are deployed in a high state of combat readiness in various mountainous locations in eastern Ladakh in sub-zero conditions as multiple rounds of talks between the two sides have not yielded any concrete outcome yet to resolve the border standoff. China has also deployed an equal number of troops, according to officials.

Meanwhile, China has cancelled plans to jointly launch commemorative stamps with India to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, the state media reported on Tuesday.

China's State Post Bureau has decided to cancel its plan to jointly launch commemorative stamps with India, state-run CGTN-TV reported, quoting a statement by the bureau without mentioning the date of the event.

No reason was given for the decision, the report said.

There was no reaction available from India's Ministry of External Affairs.

In November 2019, India and China finalised 70 celebratory activities in 2020 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries with a host of cultural, religious and trade promotion activities besides military exchanges.

The joint release of commemorative stamps was one of the activities listed by both the countries.

The celebrations were initially hit by the breakout of the coronavirus in December last year in the central Chinese city of Wuhan which later snowballed into a pandemic.

India and West Asia (5)

THE PIONEER, NEW DELHI 8-12-2020

West Asian outreach

Arab nations are warming up to India and the Army Chief's visit will further strengthen ties

The visit of Army Chief, General MM Naravane, to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) should be welcomed by all who are keen for India's relations with the Arab world to improve. The Narendra Modi Government might have made 'Look East' a cornerstone of its foreign policy but the most dramatic improvement of ties in the past six-and-a-half years has been with the Arab world. And as many Arab nations normalise their relationship with Israel, their one-time mortal enemy, India, a long-standing friend of Israel, can only be most pleased. Combined with the fact that Pakistan, which often found a steady hand of support in the Arab world, has seen its ties with the two leading nations, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, deteriorate in the recent past, India can only look from the sidelines and be pleased at the state of affairs. Saudi Arabia is upset with Pakistan switching allegiance to Turkey as a leader of the neo-Islamic world despite feeding off Gulf largesse. The Saudis went so far as to recall a major loan from Pakistan and UAE stopped issuing visas to Pakistani citizens, However, with the Saudis and the Emirates involved in complicated politics in the area, particularly with Iran, overtly through a war in Yemen, and also internecine issues in Qatar, India will also need to thread a tightrope.

India has to maintain amicable relations with all sides because of both commercial and military reasons. Naravane as a representative of the Government must be careful. That said, India's improved relations with West Asia are here to stay for the medium-term with major nations having political stability. OIC member states have been drawn by India's compliance of rulebook diplomacy, respect its non-provocative gestures and scent its economic growth and wide markets. There's a new-found

respect diplomatically after we held off China. Besides, India continues to provide skilled manpower to Arab nations. Of course, there is the challenge of how the incoming US administration will treat the area but one expects more of the same.

THE PIONEER, NEW DELHI 3-12-2020

Pak arbitrarily transferred management of Kartarpur Sahib Gurudwara, violated UNGA resolution: India

PTI

Pak arbitrarily transferred management of Kartarpur Sahib Gurudwara, violated UNGA resolution: India

India has strongly hit out against Pakistan for arbitrarily transferring the management of the Sikh holy shrine Kartarpur Sahib Gurudwara and violating an UN General Assembly resolution, saying Islamabad's move goes against Sikh religion and its preservation and protection.

In November, Pakistan transferred the management and maintenance of the Kartarpur Sahib Gurudwara from the Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee to the administrative control of the Evacuee Trust Property Board, a non-Sikh body.

"Pakistan has already violated the earlier resolution on Culture of Peace passed last year by this very assembly. Last month, Pakistan arbitrarily transferred the management of the Sikh holy shrine, Kartarpur Sahib Gurudwara, from Sikh Community body to the administrative control of a non-Sikh body," First Secretary in India's Permanent Mission to the UN Ashish Sharma said in the UN General Assembly on Wednesday.

Sharma said this act goes against Sikh religion and its preservation and protection. Sharma said the General Assembly would recall that the holy Kartarpur Sahib Gurudwara finds mention in its resolution of December 2019. "That resolution stands violated by Pakistan," he said.

The UNGA resolution 'Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace' adopted in December last year "welcomes the initiative to open up the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor in the spirit of interfaith harmony and peaceful neighbourhood, and appreciates the agreement between the Governments of India and Pakistan to allow visa-free access to pilgrims of all faiths, especially 'Nanak Naam Levas' and the Sikh community from across the world, as a landmark initiative for interreligious and intercultural cooperation for peace."

India in November called Pakistan's decision as "highly condemnable", saying it runs against the religious sentiments of the Sikh community.

"This unilateral decision by Pakistan is highly condemnable and runs against the spirit of the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor as also the religious sentiments of the Sikh community at large," India had said.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 13-12-2020

Bilateralism versus multilateralism

Written by S Shaji

India must continue to pursue institutionalisation of multilateral frameworks irrespective of regional conflicts.

Though the US presidential elections dominated the debates in international relations in November, three other events invited attention. These pertained to multilateral economic groupings. The first was the virtual summit meeting of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) on November 10, which India attended. Second, the Brazil–Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) summit meeting (November 17) chaired by Russia and, the third, the signing of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) on November 15. India attended the BRICS summit while skipping RCEP. These events came into sharp focus primarily due to Indian and Chinese involvement (or non-involvement) in the backdrop of the stand-off involving the two countries in the Himalayas.

Multilateralism and regionalism have a significant role to play in the foreign policies of countries such as India, especially due to the post-COVID world's tendency to shut borders to trade and migration. Many policy wonks believe that a regional power (like India) should consider “bilateralism” as the right approach, while others argue that national interest would be better served through mutually beneficial multilateral frameworks. The latter approach had gained momentum since the 1990s given the enormous rise in the flow of trade and capital to emerging markets. One implication of this development is the intensification of interdependence among states. This has resulted in the rise and deepening of several multilateral institutional systems. Notable examples are the expansion of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the SCO, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and India-Brazil-South Africa coalition (IBSA). Against this setting, one has to look at the recent three developments closely, in order to make sense of their relevance for India's multilateralism.

SCO, founded in 2001, is a Eurasian body comprising eight member states including India and Pakistan. India's interest in the organisation lies in its need to access Central Asian states, which have large energy resources. Over a period, a few benefits have been materialised for India though its true potential is far from realised. One must bear in mind that India has been a late entrant to the group in which China and Russia have a pre-eminent position. The recent meeting in November discussed concerns such as terrorism, fight against the pandemic and vaccine development.

BRICS, a 2009 trans-continental grouping, encompasses 41 per cent of the world's population, around one-fourth of the world economy and 70 per cent of total land. It is a formidable economic collation of five “emerging economies” signalling the rise of a new regionalism (a

theme-based regional grouping which ignores geographic contiguity) that presents an alternative platform for non-OECD states. An idea of common financial structure such as BRICS Bank is attractive to states like India. Though it is yet to spread its operational space into BRICS countries, its potential can't be dismissed. In addition, BRICS assumes paramount significance for India as the formal share of the participant countries in India's imports is around 34 per cent. Similarly, BRICS is also significant in terms of addressing non-traditional threats such as pandemics, terrorism and climate change as evident from deliberations in the recently held summit.

Unlike the recent developments pertaining to the above-mentioned blocs, RCEP projects a different picture. RCEP represents 15 powerful economies, both developed and developing from Asia-Oceania regions (China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, Vietnam and Singapore among them). The organisation is touted as the largest such group in the world, representing two billion people and constituting one of the vibrant trading blocs in the world. India was originally expected to participate (India opted out of negotiations of joining the organisation in November 2019) in the RCEP summit. RCEP constitutes around 30 per cent of the global economy with an economic size worth \$26.5 trillion. When the deal was finalised on November 17, the general opinion in India was that (a) joining the bloc would mean opening up its agriculture and service sector with negative consequences; and (b) terms regarding tariff issues, Most Favoured Nations (MFN) status and concerns about dumping etc. are unfavourable to India. India's current position is that it can strengthen bilateral economic trade with these countries to offset some of the negative impacts emanating out of the decision not to join the bloc.

A few inferences can be drawn out of these developments. One, India has to engage with regional groupings in stronger ways though China has a pre-eminent position in the architecture of these organisations. Interdependence in the economy cannot be overlooked, especially for an emerging state like India, even when there is a tendency to switch over to protectionism in the pandemic phase. In other words, India must continue to pursue institutionalisation of multilateral frameworks irrespective of regional conflicts. On such occasions, one has to look at the possibility of strengthening neighbourhood multilateral frameworks (such as SARRC, where India is at the centre or finding a feasible framework through sub-regionalism; for instance, Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Initiative). Further, domestic public opinion against a particular state should not slow down the multilateral trajectory that India has undertaken in the post-1990s.

In general, India needs to build multilateral trade blocs/economic groupings involving its South Asian neighbours along with Indian Ocean neighbours, while rejuvenating organisations such as BIMSTEC and IOR-ARC. Besides economic goals, such alliances can also broadly address non-traditional security threats. In short,

India should not allow a “recession for multilateralism” in its diplomatic vision.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 15-12-2020

Kabul, Abu Dhabi Agree to Boost Cooperation

(Pajhwok)

KABUL - Afghanistan and the United Arab Emirates have agreed to step up bilateral cooperation to a level reflecting the strategic partnership between the two countries.

The agreement came during a meeting between Afghan Ambassador Javid Ahmad and UAE Minister of Tolerance and Coexistence Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan. Saudi Press Agency reported the meeting took place at Sheikh Nahyan's Palace on Sunday.

Sheikh Nahyan said the UAE was keen on boosting cooperation with countries throughout the world to promote tolerance and coexistence.

The ambassador expressed Afghanistan's desire to enhance cooperation with the UAE in the interest of the two friendly countries.

He commended the role of the UAE and its efforts to lay the foundations for peace, tolerance and coexistence.

The diplomat commended the UAE's humanitarian and development efforts worldwide, especially in Afghanistan.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 7-12-2020

Mitigating Covid Impact: PM for stronger cooperation

Bhutan PM lauds Dhaka's Covid response; preferential trade deal signed with Bhutan

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said stronger regional and international cooperation is necessary in the coming days for mitigating the impact of the pandemic and for the rebuilding phase.

"The evolving pandemic has propagated beyond a health crisis into a growing threat on socio-economic systems and livelihoods. To counter the impact of this unknown enemy, Bangladesh has shared excellent cooperation with Bhutan and other South Asian neighbours and beyond," she said while addressing the Bangladesh-Bhutan PTA signing ceremony.

Meanwhile, Bhutanese Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering highly appreciated Hasina's leadership, saying that Bangladesh is making an impressive economic recovery from the pandemic.

Hasina and Tshering joined the event virtually from Dhaka and Thimphu.

Hasina said the pandemic has opened our eyes to the new realities that "we must consider while we strive to move forward".

"The world is countering the new and deeper fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic"

Terming the PTA signing event a historic moment for Bangladesh, she said Bangladesh has signed its first-ever Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with any country in the world and it is also the first country that recognised Bangladesh as a sovereign and an independent country.

She wished that the Preferential Trade Agreement will contribute to further consolidating bilateral relations.

"The next 50 years will witness sustained development and happiness of citizens of our region."

The PM said Bhutan has a special position in the hearts of all Bangladeshis, and a permanent place in the history of Bangladesh.

"The unwavering support of His Majesty the Third King and the people of Bhutan to our War of Liberation in 1971, and your country's recognition of the blood-soaked independent Bangladesh, evokes powerful emotions in our hearts even today."

Besides, she said Bangladesh and Bhutan share ancient linkages, common cultural values, traditions and geo-political realities.

"Today, the areas of our cooperation are many, including trade, tourism, hydro-power, climate change impacts, health, bio-diversity, agro-processing, agriculture, ICT, education, water resource management and much more."

Hasina said it is time that the two countries make their extraordinary relations even more meaningful for mutual benefits and for the overall development and well-being of its citizens and that is the spirit with which both countries have signed today [yesterday] the Bangladesh-Bhutan PTA.

"Under this agreement, a wide range of products from Bangladesh and Bhutan can find duty-free entry into each other's markets. The agreement also has provision for including an additional list of products through mutual consensus," she said.

Once the agreement comes into force, Hasina said she believed that more people in Bangladesh can have access to fresh Bhutanese apples and oranges, while the fashion-conscious people of Bhutan can choose from more varieties of quality apparels from Bangladesh.

"Infrastructure projects in Bangladesh can further benefit from boulders from Bhutan, while Bangladeshi pharmaceuticals can enhance contribution to the health sector in Bhutan," she added.

Hasina and her Bhutanese counterpart Tshering jointly opened the logo to celebrate the 50 years of relationship. Bhutan recognised Bangladesh on December 6, 1971.

They also cut cakes in their places to celebrate the signing of the PTA and the 50 years of relationship.

Hasina said there are many ways Bangladesh can cooperate with Bhutan, and Bangladesh is always ready to do it.

In this connection, she said Bhutan can use Bangladesh's waterways.

"Our waterway link has already started. We're developing our Chilmari and Pangaon ports. Not only that, if Bhutan wants, it can use any of our seaports -- Chattogram, Mongla, and Payra."

She also said Bangladesh is developing Saidpur Airport for regional use, and Bhutan can also use that.

"We're opening Chilahati railway and that'd be another opportunity for Bhutan."

In his speech, Bhutanese PM Tshering congratulated his Bangladeshi counterpart for successfully handling the coronavirus situation in Bangladesh.

"We can see Bangladesh is making a very impressive economic recovery from the pandemic."

"Bangladesh is always very close to my heart," said Tshering, expressing his desire to deepen friendship and cooperation with Bangladesh.

He said despite multiple challenges, Hasina successfully carried forward the vision and legacy of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

"People of Bangladesh will remember you forever," said Tshering.

The Bhutanese PM said the historic occasion came when Bangladesh is celebrating the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and 50 years of Bangladesh's independence to be celebrated next year. "I feel fortunate to be part of the history."

He said he spent seven years in Mymensingh Medical College and three years in Dhaka and during the period, Bangladesh became his second home.

"We all know the contributions and sacrifices that you [Hasina], your family and many others who joined today [made]," said Tshering.

With the signing of the PTA, Bhutan will enjoy duty-free export of 16 products, in addition to the already existing 18 products to Bangladesh.

Likewise, 10 more products from Bangladesh will enjoy duty-free export to Bhutan, in addition to the already 90 existing products.

Currently, Bangladesh-Bhutan trade operates under the Bilateral Trade Agreement signed in 1980.

THE BANGLADESH OBSERVER, DHAKA 15-12-2020

US interested in development plans for Ctg Port

UNB

Chargé d'Affaires at US Embassy in Dhaka JoAnne Wagner has said the United States is interested in the development plans for the Chittagong Port due to its role as gatekeeper for Bangladesh's export economy.

Wagner conveyed it to Chittagong Port Authority Chairman Rear Admiral SM Abul Kalam Azad.

During the meeting, Wagner said the U.S. Trade and Development Agency is eager to support infrastructure projects in high-growth emerging markets such as Bangladesh with feasibility studies, technical assistance, and pilot projects.

"U.S. companies are ready to provide expertise

and systems, including those to reduce congestion and boost efficiency."

Wagner and Embassy colleagues visited Chattogram Sunday and Monday to support the robust economic partnership between Bangladesh and the United States, said the US Embassy.

Wagner discussed expansion plans for the Port of Chittagong, including opportunities for participation by U.S. companies; engaged with female entrepreneurs pursuing successful businesses and overcoming gender discrimination; and explored further opportunities with the operators of Pahartali Textile and Hosiery Mills for using U.S.-grown cotton.

Successfully operating any business is difficult, even more so when faced with additional challenges due to the operator's gender, members of the Chittagong Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry told the US diplomat during a roundtable discussion.

The entrepreneurs shared methods they use to overcome discrimination and promote and grow their businesses.

They noted the growing contribution women business owners and operators make to the Bangladesh economy.

"I was impressed by the innovative and committed women of the Chittagong Women Chamber of Commerce and encouraged by the example they set for so many aspiring female entrepreneurs," said Wagner.

The US said it is committed to partnering with Bangladesh to promote inclusive economic prosperity and help create the conditions to encourage economic growth by traditionally underrepresented groups, including women.

Pahartali Textile and Hosiery Mills, a unit of Ispahani Limited, is one of the pioneer textile mills of Bangladesh.

With Mirza Salman Ispahani, Chairman of Ispahani Limited, Wagner discussed further opportunities for using U.S.-grown cotton to produce yarns for the knit and woven industries in Bangladesh.

She noted the mill demonstrates how quality imports from the United States can support the export economy of Bangladesh.

SPOTLIGHT, KATHMANDU 4-12-2020

Recent High-Level Visits From China And India Were Fruitful'

By Agencies

Minister for Foreign Affairs, Pradeep Kumar Gyawali, has said that the recently held high-level Nepal visits from China and India became fruitful reports RSS.

During today's meeting of International Relations Committee under the House of Representatives, Foreign Minister Gyawali shared that the visits made by high officials of both countries were significant to further strengthen bilateral relation and to enhance mutual cooperation.

According to RSS, Foreign Secretary of India, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, and Chinese State Councilor and Minister for Defense, Wei Fenghe, paid official visits to Nepal on November 26 and November 29 respectively.

Saying the visit of Indian Foreign Secretary Shringla has initiated the bilateral visit between Nepal and India that were stalled after COVID-19 infection, Minister Gyawali shared that official agenda of border problem between two countries was included in the visit.

Tension arose in the relation between the two countries after India issued a new map incorporating Nepali territory and inaugurated a road linking Mansarobar via Lipulek, and Nepal also issued a map recently incorporating its territory—Limpiyadhura, Lipulek and Kalapani.

The Foreign Minister further said that Nepal-India joint meeting would be held soon and efforts would be taken to resolve the problems as much as possible from the meeting.

Similarly, Chinese Defense Minister Wei's visit became crucial to exchange military support as well as to further strengthen bilateral relations, opined Minister Gyawali.

He shared that the visit became fruitful to give pace to the agreements signed during Chinese President Xi Jinping's Nepal visit last year.

New foreign policy in the offing

He went on to say that efforts at different levels are going on to find a solution to Nepal –India border disputes, adding Nepal and China had no border dispute issues. “The government will issue the country’s new foreign policy within the next few days.”

According to the Minister, the government is making initiation to get a vaccine against the coronavirus and 20 per cent vaccine will be achieved on a subsidy under the COVAX and the government has already written to several countries to bring the remaining quantity of the vaccine reports RSS.

SPOTLIGHT, KATHMANDU 14-12-2020

FOREIGN POLICY 2020

Bundle of Jargons

Keshab Prasad Poudel

As in the past, the new government led by Nepal Communist Party-NCP has announced Nepal’s Foreign Policy 2020

As soon as Nepali Congress formed its government in 1991, Prime Minister late Girija Prasad Koirala declared that Human Rights and Democracy would be the foundation of Nepal’s foreign policy.

In a similar manifestation and declaration, rebel leader prime minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, in his first address to the nation, said Nepal is no more a yam between two nations, but dynamite between the two. Merely 10 months in power, the Prachanda-led Maoist government was blasted out of power.

As a prime minister, Dr. Baburam Bhattarai declared that the era of equidistance was over and he propounded a new theory of Nepal as a link between the two big countries.

A government formed under the leadership of NC leader in 2017 constituted a high-level committee to draft Nepal’s Foreign Policy. However, the government was ousted without receiving the document.

Coming to power three years ago, harping on anti-Indian slogans, Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli has also endorsed the Foreign Policy 2020. Amid a function, Minister for Foreign Affairs Pradeep Kumar Gyawali released the document. He declared Nepal’s Foreign Policy is for a rule-based, just, inclusive human rights-centric world system.

“We are for a rule-based global system, the current deal-based system would be detrimental for the interest of the small nations. Therefore, the policy aims at a rule-based, just, inclusive and human-centric world system,” declared Foreign Minister Gyawali in the program.

“Foreign Policy, 2020 has integrated the varying components of diplomatic practices across the sectors ranging from defense to the United Nations. This will be the central policy of the country’s foreign relations, on the basis of which other related policies would be formulated or amended,” said Gyawali.

Being a small country between big powers, Nepal’s geographical position has not changed since the country constituted itself as an independent and sovereign nation over 230 years ago.

Its political geography has not changed and its foreign policy and challenges remain the same. However, individual rulers have brought out such documents from time to time to project their views. All of them have turned out irrelevant and out of context. What it shows is that Nepal is in continuity as a nation with continuity of real policy destined by its geography.

As American scholar, late Leo Rose in his book Strategy of Survival says from King Prithvi Narayan Shah to present ruler King Mahendra had faced the same limitations and challenges. Even Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli has been facing the same problems, the only differences will be in style.

With a small nation situated between two big powers with a diverse political system, Nepal has a very thin space to play and it has many limitations. Among the two nations, Nepal’s relations with its southern neighbors are closely tied by common civilization, culture, religion and history.

Given this reality, Nepal’s foreign policy is defined by its destiny. “Nepal has every right to determine its foreign policy matters. However, it has its limitation which impinges upon her. Taking into account the reality of its

geostrategic situation,” one foreign policy expert opined, “Nepal’s freedom of choice is obviously limited by the exigencies of power politics.... Nepal’s strategic location afforded its scope of maneuvering within limits. These limits are, in practice, set by what India and China consider to be their minimal interest in a given situation. As long as Nepal keeps within these limits, it is free to manipulate in any way it likes in relations with its immediate neighbors and other countries,” writes former foreign secretary Professor Bishwa Pradhan in his book *Diplomatic Strategy for Nepal*. “If Nepal is tempted to overestimate its strength and loses sight of the practical limits of its capacity to maneuver, it encounters real danger.”

Whether the policy looks at Nepal’s reality is another matter. However, the government has claimed that this is the first time an integrated foreign policy has been brought out for the country.

“The main aim of the policy is to protect and promote the national interest. The country needs a policy that can define its role in the changed geopolitical and global political context,” said Foreign Affairs Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali at a program organized at the ministry to launch the policy and annual report of the MoFA.

The policy is the synthesis of various past practices such as the National Main Policy of the Panchayat era and reports of the commissions like task force led by Murari Raj Sharma in post-2006 change and commission led by Prof. Shreedhar Khatri in 2015.

It has taken references from the past study reports as well as National Dialogue on Foreign Policy organized last year. The policy is also the product of the consultation of Buddha’s teaching on peace and non-violence, Prithvi Narayan Shah’s *Dibyopadesh* on geopolitical considerations and demographic diversity in the country.

According to Minister Gyawali, the new policy has offered the policy requirement needed for the relations with the immediate neighbors to the multilateral organizations like the United Nations, and track-two diplomacy.

It aims at expanding and strengthening the bilateral relations with all friendly countries including the immediate neighbors on the basis of equality, mutual respect and benefits.

“Nepal’s international borders would be kept intact. The border issues would be resolved through diplomatic and peaceful means on the basis of historical agreements, treaties and evidence,” it read.

Contradictions

Every country pursues its foreign policy to protect and promote the country’s core interests; Nepal’s foreign policy is unclear within. At a time when global perception on the Palestinian issue has changed drastically with oil rich Gulf countries have started to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with Israel, Nepal is still following same old dictum to cast votes in UN system against Israel supporting Palestinian cause.

Nepal has several economic other interests with Israel and Nepal can benefit a lot from maintaining neutrality in the

case of the Israel-Palestinian issue. Despite no greater interest attach to Palestine, Nepal has been voting for the Palestinian cause UN System for the last many years. In many cases, Nepal can easily win Israel’s favor if absent in voting. That can make a lot of difference for Nepal.

“Nepal has to decide in voting where Nepal’s interest is protected more,” said former foreign secretary and secretary-general of SAARC Arjun Bahadur Thapa. “Since Nepal and Israel established diplomatic relations over 60 years ago and Nepal’s relation with Israel is economically more valuable for the country, there is no reason for Nepal to vote in favor of Palestinian in every issue. Nepal can register as absentee.”

Realizing the importance of Israel for Nepal’s economic development, Nepal’s two visionary leaders King Mahendra and democratically elected leader B.P. Koirala took the riskiest decision but most favorable decision in Nepal’s interest during 1960. However, Nepal has failed to carry on the spirit of visionary leadership supporting the sovereignty and integrity of a small country like Israel which serves Nepal’s interest as well.

Although protection and promotion of Nepal’s interest is a core issue of newly announced foreign policy, it is unclear how Nepal will deal with the issue of Israel and Palestine.

“Nepal has to follow changing context of Israel-Palestinian issue in current changing circumstances when Oil-rich Gulf countries have recognized Israel’s existence giving their old policy,” said Thapa in his interview to an online.

Reviewing Treaties

Bilateral treaties and agreements with the neighbors and other friendly countries would be reviewed and amended in the national interest and new treaties would be signed as per the need. Current commerce, transit, railway service, trade and payment and transportation agreements and treaties would be amended as per the changing national and international scenario.

“Any policy needs to be based on realistic assumptions. If it fails to address realistic issues, it is doomed to fail,” said Professor Dr. Lok Raj Baral.

As Nepal’s Foreign Policy 2020 talks about amending and rewriting the treaties, it naturally attracts India with whom Nepal signed several bilateral treaties. Nepal’s communist leaders including the current leadership in the government thrived in the party calling some of those treaties unequal.

“Bulk of our foreign policy engagements is with India. Whether one likes it not, the geopolitics is such that, as immediate neighbors, we are bound to have bilateral problems of multi-faced character in our relations with India. Basically, Nepal’s foreign policy is India policy which covers most of the aspects of it ranging from the socio-economic to political fields,” writes former secretary Pradhan.

Professor Dev Raj Dahal in his article *Geopolitics of Nepal, Survival Strategy of Small States*, writes, “because of interdependence, Nepalese foreign policy must be based

more on national and regional consensus, explicit and implicit, by taking the national interest into account.”

The policy aims at emphasizing the United Nation’s central role in multilateral diplomacy to make a contribution in the promotion of world peace, human rights and sustainable development.

“Collaboration with the international community would be forged for the complete disarmament of atomic, biological, chemical and other weapons of mass destruction,” read the policy. It also includes a provision for solidarity and cooperation with the international community against all forms of terrorism and extremism.

Enhancing Nepal’s role in international platforms like the UN Human Rights Commission and forums of landlocked and least developed countries, and playing an effective role in the reduction of greenhouse gas and adaption to combat the challenges posed by climate change and its negative impacts are also the policy priorities.

In terms of regional cooperation, the policy aims at increasing the regional interdependency and interconnectivity to achieve development and prosperity.

Similarly, it has duly recognized the importance of the foreign policy in the mobilization of foreign economic and development cooperation, foreign direct investment, export trade and tourism promotion which are fundamental for the development and prosperity of the country.

Managing foreign employment, utilizing the knowledge, skill, capital, technology and access of migrant Nepalis in the economic development of the country, protecting the interest of Nepali nationals in a foreign land, and application of track-two diplomacy is the priority.

With so many limitations in a foreign policy imposed by Nepal’s geo-strategy, Nepal’s policy needs to address the reality. Late Leo Rose in his book *Nepal, Profile of The Himalayan Kingdom*, writes, “it is a normal phenomenon for the foreign policy of any society to be strongly affected by domestic political and economic factors, and this is certainly the case in Nepal. But the reverse principle—namely, those international factors have a strong and decisive impact on Kathmandu’s policies—is even more apparent.”

As an ancient Greek adage stated, “the strong nation do what they will do and the weaker ones do what they must.” Given Nepal’s geo-strategic position, Nepal has a very thin space to play between two big neighbors. Nepal has to follow the course where Nepal’s core interest lies and get much.

SPOTLIGHT, KATHMANDU 15-12-2020 **CHINESE DEFENSE MINISTER’S VISIT**

Security Concern

By A Correspondent

Chinese Defense Chief’s visit to Nepal indicates the growing security concerns

With over 1400 km long border in most difficult parts of Tibet, Nepal has always been a highly sensitive buffer

zone for the Chinese security apparatus. This was what the recent 7-hour stopover visit of Chinese State Councilor and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe indicated.

Given the globally shifting power balance and emerging new world order amid COVID-19, Chinese interest in Nepal is likely to intensify in the coming days. This is also what the recent visit indicated.

After spending most of his time discussing security matters at Nepal Army Headquarters, Chinese State Councilor and Defense Minister Fenghe paid a courtesy call to Prime Minister and Defense Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and President Bidhya Devi Bhandari at the end of the visit.

Upon his arrival, General Wei was presented with a Guard of Honour at the Army Headquarters. General Wei then paid an official call on General Purna Chandra Thapa, Chief of the Army Staff, Nepali Army, at the latter’s office.

On that occasion, the distinguished visitor, General Wei and General Thapa held a cordial discussion on various issues of bilateral interest. A representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was also present during the discussion.

After the call, General Wei Fenghe and his delegation were given a short presentation on the history and roles of the Nepali Army. Bilateral discussions were then held at the delegation-level mainly on issues pertaining to the resumption of training and student exchange program and follow-up on defense assistance that have been impacted due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to a press release issued by the Public Relations and Information Directorate of Nepal Army, General Wei and the delegation viewed both the proposals positively.

“The Nepali Army is confident that this visit will help in further strengthening and expanding the cordial military to military relations between the two countries,” said the press release.

“General Wei and the delegation viewed both the proposals positively and affirmed that the bilateral cooperation should resume as soon as possible, including the exchange of high-level visits. General Wei also pledged to provide additional assistance to the Nepali Army in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic,” read the statement.

He was the highest-ranking Chinese official to visit the plateau country after China’s top leader visited Kathmandu in October 2019.

“When Wei met President Bidya Devi Bhandari and Prime Minister and Minister for Defense KP Sharma Oli, they discussed economic cooperation amid the framework of the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative and military exchanges,” reported Global Times, a Chinese media close to Chinese Communist Party.

As in the past, Chinese defense minister Wei noted that China firmly supports Nepal to safeguard its national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and

will continue assisting Nepal's military development, contributing to regional peace and stability.

Wei also discussed the international and regional situations and bilateral diplomatic and military relations with Nepal's Chief of Army Staff General Purna Chandra Thapa.

Wei's trip came days after Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla visited Nepal. Indian officials have paid frequent visits to Nepal since late October, including Samant Goel, chief of India's Research and Analysis Wing and Indian Army Chief.

Chinese media reported that Wei's visit is also a warning for anti-China hardliners in India who do not reflect on themselves but seek to sow discord between China and Nepal and provoke trouble.

During his call on Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, he said that his visit was aimed at implementing the bilateral agreements made by the head of states and head of governments of the two neighbors in the past.

Earlier, speaking after his welcome by Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa at the Tribhuvan International Airport, he had said that his visit also had the objective of enhancing the bilateral military assistance and strengthening the relations between the two countries.

Wei was welcomed by Minister Thapa, Secretary of the Home Ministry Reshmi Raj Pandey, Lieutenant General of Nepal Army Prabhu Ram Sharma, Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Hou Yanqi, Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Kali Prasad Pokharel and other dignitaries.

Talking to the media persons at the Tribhuvan International Airport, Wei said that the objective of his one-day visit was to bolster mutual military cooperation and further strengthen the bilateral ties between the two countries.

During the call-on, views were exchanged on matters of mutual interest including the further promotion of traditionally friendly relations between Nepal and China.

Stating that Nepal and China have strong relations, the visiting Chinese dignitary said that he had arrived in Nepal with a goal to take Nepal-China ties to a newer height. "I am confident that the visit would be result-oriented. My visit to Nepal is slightly delayed by the COVID-19 but it will be a special one," he said.

Whatever the Chinese Defense Minister said his visit has indicated that Tibet Security is their major and only one concern in Nepal.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 15-12-2020

The business of foreign affairs

Sujeev Shakya

As Nepal shows a renewed focus on foreign policy, it is necessary to think about possible transformative changes.

Last week, the government released the 31-page Nepal Foreign Policy 2077 document. While it is no doubt interesting that the government has finally thought to bring

forward a seemingly comprehensive policy direction in an area much neglected, I continue to question the basics surrounding its release. With no official English translation released, it seems like the document was meant for the domestic audience. But how can people who do not read Nepali understand it? If it were to have been released in the six official UN languages, Hindi and Bengali, it would have been a groundbreaking effort that would cover most of our neighbourhood and the countries strategically important to us.

Whenever Nepalis look to reimagine issues, we get stuck building on the past rather than looking ahead. It is like trying to find new ways to fix the fax machine when most of the world has moved on to better forms of communication. Nepal needs to continuously have a futuristic perspective on managing the fundamentals, rather than trying to repair a broken past. In this regard, we can focus on some key areas.

First, we need to think of the large population of Nepalis around the world and the services that they need. A survey that we ran, when I was visiting the US regularly in the early 2000s, told us that people of the diaspora were willing to pay as much as \$100 to get a birth certificate (and other important administrative documents) attested and sent back to them. I had proposed to the Nepal Embassy in the US how this service could be thought of as a profit centre—a point from where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or individual embassies could gain a large chunk of much-needed revenue. Yet, the thought was considered too disruptive back then.

Perhaps the time has come to revisit this idea, particularly considering how some countries gain back the cost of building new embassy buildings from just the visa fees and services sold from those individual embassies. The five million-odd Nepalis around the world who have to jump through hoops to avail of consular services would undoubtedly appreciate it. Embassies, at the same time, would not be pressured to handle mundane issues that arise when a service-oriented system is not in place. And, such a service provided through the embassies wouldn't be as exploitative and problematic as some of the private, outsourced companies that other countries are known to employ.

Second, we need an institution that focuses on the selective study of countries and regions from around the world. Global events can be held, and collaborative projects can be undertaken. Such an institution would then mould academics that could make better policy recommendations, particularly foreign policy. Hundreds of well-trained Nepalis who have studied international relations from a top institution will be more than happy to serve their own country; they will bring not only their experience, but also the connections they have fostered through global links. For a young Nepali who aspires to contribute to Nepal's transformation, this would be an essential institution. The revenue gained from providing effective service through embassies could fund this institution.

Third, we need to reimagine how the government connects with its diaspora. The Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA) was created in 2003 when there were less than half a million Nepalis (besides the Nepalis residing in India) living abroad. Today, when there are more than five million. This necessitates recalibration. I had personally spent a couple of years helping NRNA to create its Vision 2030 and implement transformation, but politics has dominated the discourse.

The associations that dominate the lives of the diaspora have become vote banks; even the newer political groups in Nepal see them that way. It seems the transformation of non-resident contribution through the NRNA seems complicated, while the second generation of non-resident Nepalis feels disconnected from the ancestral home. Perhaps an independent entity within the Foreign Ministry or the NRNA can lead the necessary changes. The issues that need dire attention are the provisioning for dual citizenships, helping Nepalis invest or grow their businesses abroad, and unleashing Nepal's soft power. The latter can focus on Nepal's rich endowment of nature, heritage and the diversity of its art, culture, music and culinary experiences. If the government sought help, there would be hundreds that would volunteer.

Finally, what will be required is the change in the old mindset of cronyism and nepotism. Nepal needs to reimagine its diplomacy. It has to move away from politics. If it is to succeed, it would be better to run the system like a business—with a CEO at the helm that delivers the triple bottom line; namely, surpluses from services, high impact unleashing of Nepal's soft power and happy citizens who are genuinely proud of their country.

DAILY MIRROR, COLOMBO 10-12-2020

SL - Japan - India in touch to develop Eastern Container Terminal (ECT)

By Kelum Bandara

Investment by India and Japan a win-win-win opportunity

Indian High Commissioner Gopal Baglay said India was ready to support Sri Lanka to get the Rajagala archaeological reserve declared as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

In an exclusive interview with the Daily Mirror, he said he once visited the site with archaeological proof of Arahata Mahinda's visit to Sri Lanka in the ancient past. Asked about India's repeated emphasis on the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, he said India believes that as a close neighbour and maritime partner, an indivisible, strong, secure, democratic and pluralistic Sri Lanka is in India's interest besides being in Sri Lanka's own.

“The underlying emphasis of India is on strengthening Sri Lanka,” he said .

Responding to a query about the development of the East Container Terminal of the Colombo Port , he said Sri Lanka, Japan and India were in touch through diplomatic channels regarding the development of it.

He said the trilateral Memorandum of Cooperation was concluded in 2019 among India, Japan and Sri Lanka regarding the development operation of the ECT.

“Experts, including in Sri Lanka, have pointed out that having India as a partner in the project would benefit the Colombo Port and Sri Lanka, since more than 60% of Colombo Port's trans-shipment business is with India. India's participation in ECT will also ensure continuity to the strong shipping ties between India and Sri Lanka when deep ports come up on Indian coasts, which are not far away,” he said.

- India would be happy to help SL in getting Rajagala as UNESCO World Heritage site

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 2-12-2020

Foreign Policy Goals

The meeting of the Council of Heads of Government of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is significant for Pakistan in a number of ways. Firstly, it is the first meeting of the SCO after the coronavirus pandemic shook the world. A meeting of world leaders, amidst sweeping new developments such as a new US President and several new global alliances, is bound to be impactful any way, most of all during a pandemic when these meetings have become rarer.

Secondly, as the region's geopolitics shift, Pakistan is increasingly becoming a player in new alliances being built. The SCO-CHG focuses primarily on economic and trade cooperation—there are many new developments and opportunities for Pakistan in that regard. The region is rife with potential for more trade, connectivity and integration, with Pakistan already being a player by working on projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This means that Pakistan has an incentive in better trade relationships between other countries in the region as well, particularly Iran, and peace in Afghanistan.

These are all important issues to raise—our goal going towards the meeting is to work towards our foreign policy objectives. So far, Pakistan is doing well—despite the obvious elephant in the room, which is that India is hosting the meeting. Their hosting is something Pakistan can use to its advantage—despite Indian officials throwing baseless allegations as usual, Pakistan has not given in to the theatrics and is focused on policy issues. This will allow us to continue undeterred in our foreign policy goals, as well as reveal India's attempts to put obstacles to connectivity and peace, as it provokes stand-offs with not just Pakistan, but China as well.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 11-12-2020

India shamed over anti-Pakistan disinformation network

Iftikhar A. Khan

ISLAMABAD: A day after the disclosure of a disinformation network being run by India for 15 years to discredit nations it is in conflict with, Islamabad advised Delhi to stop churning out false propaganda against its rivals and focus on its internal problems.

Speaking at a weekly press briefing, Foreign Office spokesman Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri condemned India for systematic tactic of a mass propaganda campaign to malign Pakistan and international institutions.

In a related development, Prime Minister Imran Khan in a tweet said the revelation by Brussels-based EU DisinfoLab group about the widespread Indian network of subversive activities vindicates Pakistan's position and exposed its detractors. "The international community needs to take notice of a rogue Indian regime that now threatens the stability of the global system."

The FO spokesman denounced India's actions outlined in the EU DisinfoLab report as "mischievous" and noted that they reflected a "pre-occupation with maligning Pakistan".

He said all such attempts were "doomed to fail [because] Pakistan has already put forth irrefutable evidence, extensively documenting India's active planning, promoting, aiding, abetting, financing and executing terrorist activities in Pakistan".

The report was a vindication for Pakistan and substantiated its position in front of the international community, Mr Chaudhri said.

PM calls for world community to take notice of 'rogue Indian regime'

"By spreading such falsehoods, India can neither cast a shadow on the international stature of Pakistan nor can it divert attention of the international community from India's horrendous human rights record," he said.

"Instead of wasting more time in peddling falsehoods and fake news, India would be well-advised to put its house in order and take care of its own issues of poverty, grave human rights violations, exploitation of minority rights and rising radicalism," he added.

The spokesman said the exposé of Indian disinformation campaign by EU DisinfoLab required global attention as India's subversive activities against Pakistan had been ignored for too long.

He condemned the arrests of Muslim youth in India under the newly promulgated discriminatory and inhuman law, which penalises members of religious minorities for marrying as per their own free will.

"This law is further manifestation of the mindset of Hindu supremacist RSS-BJP regime, which takes pride in degrading and humiliating minorities, particularly Muslims in India, and relegating them to second-class citizens," the spokesman said.

He called upon the international community to take note of such steps by the RSS-BJP regime, which were fuelled by its hatred of the minority communities.

"Rather than giving in to the fantasy-driven 'Love Jihad' allegations of its fanatic cadres, the current [Indian] regime should ensure protection of fundamental human rights of all of its citizens, irrespective of their religious affiliations," he said.

Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi also commented on the report in a tweet, saying the Indian actions were powered by "fascist ideals" that "even put Goebbels to shame".

On Wednesday, the EU DisinfoLab published its latest report, titled "Indian Chronicles", revealing that more than 750 Indian-backed websites covering over 95 countries have been operational for about 15 years to undermine Pakistan within the European Union and United Nations.

Internationally, the network is working to consolidate the power and improve the image of India and damage reputation of rival countries so that ultimately India may benefit from more support from international institutions such as the European Union and the United Nations.

Answering a question about the reports of India planning a misadventure against Pakistan, the FO spokesman said the Indian government's irresponsible behavior was well known to the world.

"This RSS-inspired BJP government has a history of using 'Pakistan card' to score political points and to shift focus from its profound failures of governance, faltering economy, state sponsorship of terrorism and violation of minority rights," he remarked.

He said Pakistan had been consistently sensitising the international community regarding the possibility of India resorting to a false flag operation and "we... forewarn the world yet again".

"Our forces remain vigilant and are ready to respond to any misadventure by India," the spokesman said.

Plight of Kashmiri women

To mark International Human Rights Day, a panel discussion was held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the plight of women in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK).

The talk was attended by Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Foreign Secretary Sohail Mahmood, parliamentarians, members of the diplomatic corps and representatives of NGOs and think tanks.

The panelists included human rights activist Mushaal Hussein Mullick, former minister for social welfare and women development of Azad Jammu and Kashmir Farzana Yaqoob, Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs Andaleeb Abbas and Parliamentary Secretary for Law and Justice Barrister Maleeka Bukhari. Director General of Kashmir Cell Sadia Altaf Qazi hosted the event.

The discussion focused on the atrocities being committed against women in IIOJK by Indian occupation forces and

the physical, psychological, social and economic ramifications of these actions. Psychiatrist Dr Asma Humayun dilated upon the mental health aspect of the situation.

Foreign Minister Qureshi highlighted the human rights and humanitarian dimension of the Kashmir issue in the context of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He called on the international community to take note of the atrocities being committed by Indian occupation forces, hold India to account and urge it to fulfill its human rights obligations.

The participants were shown documentaries and first-hand accounts of human rights abuses being perpetrated against the women of IIOJK.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 14-12-2020

A restoration in ties?

Saman Rizwan

In a rare move, Pakistan's high commissioner to Bangladesh met with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, pledging to improve the otherwise dormant bilateral relationship between the countries.

Conceivably, the telephonic conversation of PM Imran Khan with his Bangladeshi counterpart paved the way in fusing the troublesome relations between the two countries. The backchannel diplomacy conducted over the year could upend the historic configurations of the South Asian region. The initiative of advancing cultural and economic ties is to be lauded. However, this series of diplomatic initiatives is breaking the long-standing impasse in maintaining cordial relations.

In the past years, cooperation remained limited. In fact, the two countries came at odds after the government of Bangladesh resumed the 1971 war crimes trials. The trials led to several leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami being tried and executed for siding with Pakistan (during the 1971 conflict). However, Pakistan claimed the executions were 'politically motivated' and had not been conducted to mete out justice. Bangladesh viewed these comments as interference in its domestic affairs. As a response, the Saarc summit in September 2016 was boycotted by Bangladesh to protest against Pakistan's stance on those Bangladesh called war criminals who were guilty of participating in the 1971 war. Following the trials, relations between the two countries reached a low.

Now, with the changing geopolitical realities, regional actors should move past their historical baggage and see their relations with other countries in a new light. There are two routes to reconciliation, as suggested by academics Arie Nadler and Tamar Saguy: a) Socio-Emotional Reconciliation; b) Trust-Building Reconciliation.

The first route of reconciliation centers around the actors' wish to avenge the wrongdoings committed against them in the past and the perpetrator to pay its debt by

apologizing and accepting the responsibility of its actions. The second deals with joint projects which can result in establishing an atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation.

In the case of Pakistan-Bangladesh ties, the application of the first route will account for an official recognition from Pakistan concerning the 1971 debacle. On the other hand, the latter route for reconciliation seems more viable as Pakistan and Bangladesh can work on improving their trade relations which will lead to enhancing the diplomatic mechanisms.

The combined trade potential of Pakistan and Bangladesh is \$345 billion, with a consumer market of around \$346 million, as per writer Zahid Shahab and Musharaf Zahoor. The rationale for the two countries to enhance their bilateral relations appears promising.

Recent developments in the region provide both the countries with an opportunity to establish a common ground and work towards building a concrete relationship. New Delhi faces a reduced sphere of influence vis-a-vis Bangladesh after the passing of the controversial citizenship law in India led to an increase in deportation of the Bangladeshis' living in the eastern wing of India.

The prevailing regional dynamics might pave the way for recalibrating the policy decisions in both countries. A look at the redundancy of Saarc puts into perspective the low level of integration within the South Asian region. While the forum aimed to enhance regional cooperation and act as a catalyst for development in the region, the political realities of the region have kept the member states rather ambivalent towards its functionality. It is imperative to understand that these regional frameworks have become dysfunctional due to the underlying scepticism and mistrust. These are the very reasons that restrict the rapprochement between Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The associated historical baggage significantly limits both the countries to take concrete steps in maintaining cordial ties. However, if the countries can manage to bury the hostility and start anew with restored commitment, then the incentives of increasing regional collaborations are high. The other regional blocs such as the EU and ASEAN are sustaining their regional frameworks despite sharing a bitter history. That is a lesson in itself for other regional actors.

Bilateral tensions between Pakistan and Bangladesh act as a hindrance and sabotage the spirit of multilateralism. Initiation of cultural and economic activities will help the countries reconstruct the existing narrative within their people. Lastly, shifting away from conflictual patterns will lead to greater prosperity and cooperation.

II - ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

| | Subject | Newspapers/Periodicals | Date | Page |
|-----|---|-----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| | INDIA | | | |
| 1. | Indian economy witnessing V-shaped recovery: FinMin report - PNS | The Pioneer, New Delhi | 4-12-2020 | 15 |
| 2. | FDI equity inflows into India cross \$500 billion milestone By Kanishka Sarkar | The Hindustan Times, New Delhi | 6-12-2020 | 15 |
| 3. | India's evolving energy diplomacy Editorial | The Hindustan Times, New Delhi | 9-12-2020 | 16 |
| 4. | The Indian economy is bouncing back By Jyotiraditya Scindia | The Hindustan Times, New Delhi | 9-12-2020 | 16 |
| 5. | Budget 2021-22 to push infra spending, have vibrancy to ensure economic revival: FM - PTI AFGHANISTAN | The Tribune, Chandigarh | 15-12-2020 | 17 |
| 6. | World Bank Approves \$85 Million in Grants for Afghanistan - ATN BANGLADESH | Outlook Afghanistan, Kabul | 13-12-2020 | 18 |
| 7. | Bangladesh signs trade deal with Bhutan today By Refayet Ullah Mirdha | The Daily Star, Dhaka | 6-12-2020 | 18 |
| 8. | BD to make most progress on sustainable energy: WB - Business Correspondent NEPAL | The Daily Observer, Dhaka | 15-12-2020 | 19 |
| 9. | Nepal-India agree to amend transit treaty By Agencies | Spotlight, Kathmandu | 8-12-2020 | 20 |
| 10. | Nepal and India agree to finalise regulatory modality to export Nepal's surplus power to India By New Spotlight Online SRI LANKA | Spotlight, Kathmandu | 12-12-2020 | 21 |
| 11. | India pledges to deepen economic ties with SL By Nirmala Sitharaman | Daily Mirror, Colombo | 2-12-2020 | 21 |

| | | | | |
|-----|--|--------------------------|------------|----|
| 12. | Budget 2021 and the External Sector in a Changing Global Order - The Collective for economic Democracy PAKISTAN | Daily Mirror, Colombo | 5-12-2020 | 22 |
| 13. | Managing the economy By Riaz Khokhar | The News, Islamabad | 4-12-2020 | 24 |
| 14. | Pakistan secures \$873mln debt relief from Paris Club By Israr Khan | The News, Islamabad | 8-12-2020 | 25 |
| 15. | Next five years' economic growth not encouraging By Khaleeq Kiani | Dawn, Islamabad | 9-12-2020 | 26 |
| 16. | Pakistan's economy recovering: ADB report By Mehtab Haider | The News, Islamabad | 11-12-2020 | 27 |
| 17. | Pakistan signed up for \$10.5bn foreign loan in FY20 By Khaleeq Kiani | Dawn, Islamabad | 12-12-2020 | 27 |

THE PIONEER, NEW DELHI 4-12-2020

Indian economy witnessing V-shaped recovery: FinMin report

PNS

The Indian economy is witnessing a V-shaped recovery as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has recorded a quarter-on-quarter growth of 23 per cent in the July-September quarter of this fiscal, according to the Finance Ministry's latest Monthly Economic Review.

The decline in the GDP narrowed to 7.5 per cent in the second quarter of this financial year, over 23.9 per cent in April-June quarter.

“The year-on-year GDP contraction of 7.5 per cent in Q2 of 2020-21 underlies a quarter-on-quarter surge in GDP growth of 23 per cent.

“This V-shaped recovery, evident at the half-way stage of 2020-21, reflects the resilience and robustness of the Indian economy.

The fundamentals of the economy remain strong as gradual scaling back of lockdowns, along with the astute support of Atmanirbhar Bharat Mission has placed the economy firmly on the path of recovery,” the Monthly Economic Review for November said.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 6-12-2020

FDI equity inflows into India cross \$500 billion milestone

Kanishka Sarkar

According to the data of the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), the inflows during the period stood at \$500.12 billion.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) equity inflows into India crossed the \$500 billion milestone during April 2000 to September 2020 period, firmly establishing the country's credentials as a safe and key investment destination in the world.

According to the data of the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), the inflows during the period stood at \$500.12 billion.

About 29 per cent of the FDI came through the Mauritius route. It was followed by Singapore (21 per cent), the US, the Netherlands, Japan (each 7 per cent), and the UK (6 per cent).

India received \$144.71 billion from Mauritius and about \$106 billion from Singapore during the period under review.

The other big investors have been from Germany, Cyprus, France and Cayman Islands.

Since 2015-16, FDI inflows have been recording significant growth. In that fiscal, the country received \$40 billion FDI, an increase of 35 per cent over the previous year. In 2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20, the investments stood at \$43.5 billion, \$44.85 billion, \$44.37 billion and \$50 billion, respectively.

The key sectors which attracted the maximum of these inflows include services segment, computer software and hardware, telecommunications, trading, construction development, automobile, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals.

“Indian FDI journey began with enactment of FEMA (that replaced the draconian FERA) in 1999. Looking back, the half-trillion dollar FDI in India is an indication of foreign investor's firm belief in India's strong economic fundamentals, stable political outlook and sustained economic growth which generated returns for investors even during the global recession of 2007-08,” Nischal Arora, Partner- Regulatory, Nangia Andersen India said.

He said as the country cautiously steps into the next decade under the shadow of the ongoing pandemic, it is imperative that the government continues its measures to attract FDI in the manufacturing and high-end technology sectors.

Rajat Wahi, Partner, Deloitte India, said FDI equity inflows crossing \$500 billion “is indeed a great milestone, and continues to show the trust and faith that the global investors have in India's growing economy”.

This growth is a strong reflection of the market potential of India coupled with the steady state of market reforms that India has undertaken since 2000, including opening up of various sectors of the economy to 100 per cent FDI over the last 5 years, he said.

When asked about what more steps the government can take to give a leg-up to increase FDI, Wahi said while the overall market potential of India will always be high, given the large population, many other factors like ease of doing business, land, labour laws, tax rates, availability of talent, logistics, and political stability also play important role in attracting FDI to any country.

“While we have improved significantly across many of these areas over the last decade, and especially over the last 5 years, there is still a long way to go for us to be able to compete with countries like China and other markets like Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia,” he added.

However, Gunjan Shah, Partner, Private Equity, Merger & Acquisitions & General Corporate, Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas, said: “I would not attribute this (crossing \$500 billion mark) to increased investor confidence in the Indian market. There is a lot of liquidity around the world right now and the real test would be to see if a higher proportion of that is being deployed in India.” Shah said clarity on regulatory and tax issues could help increase FDI and the government should also consider further

liberalisation of capital intensive industries like banking and insurance.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 9-12-2020

India's evolving energy diplomacy

The real challenge for India's energy diplomacy is preparing the ground for a post-oil future in a manner that ensures oil markets abet rather than disrupt this larger transition

India today can absorb somewhat higher global oil prices, and shift focus on attracting the massive investments needed for its natural gas and renewable energy plans

The recent decision of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to allow a muted increase in production in the first quarter of next year was welcomed by petroleum and natural gas minister, Dharmendra Pradhan, because of what it means for price stability rather than the hope it means cheaper oil.

India stands to gain because oil producers need to generate revenues necessary to maintain the investment levels to ensure steady oil supply. India's relations with the largest oil producers, notably the Persian Gulf monarchies and Russia, also increasingly revolve around them ploughing their earnings into India's oil and gas sector. New Delhi's ambitious plans for energy transition partly depend on the financial status of the largest OPEC members — a partnership OPEC acknowledged at the recent India-OPEC institutional dialogue. Mr Pradhan was notably more interested in potential OPEC investments in India than the ups and downs of oil production.

Despite OPEC's earlier production cuts and its projected increases, global prices have remained in the \$40 to \$50 a barrel range. Thanks to record foreign exchange reserves, India today can absorb somewhat higher global oil prices, and shift focus on attracting the massive investments needed for its natural gas and renewable energy plans. Implicit is the recognition oil is rapidly ceasing to be a strategic commodity. The real challenge for India's energy diplomacy is preparing the ground for a post-oil future in a manner that ensures oil markets abet rather than disrupt this larger transition.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 9-12-2020

The Indian economy is bouncing back

Jyotiraditya Scindia

With a judicious mix of spending and structural reforms, the government has paved the way for an impressive recovery

The government's first priority is to keep the pandemic spread under control. The second is to sustain the momentum of recovery, so that it enters the positive territory by the end of the third quarter

“You can't discover light by analysing the dark.” The quote by Wayne Dyer resonates with the four-month episode of the great economic fall that followed the pandemic, with predictions of a gory climax. Critics claimed that it would take more than one or two years for India to reverse the Q1 23.9% GDP contraction.

The last four months, however, have witnessed a desirable twist; a flush of optimism for businesses, governments and the financial markets, brought in by a 7.5% contraction in Q2 — better than most street estimates. This figure beats the global average, where according to an analysis by State Bank of India, 49 economies declined at an average of 12.4%.

Going by the latest trends and government forecasts, India's economy is likely to return to pre-Covid-19 levels by the end of the current fiscal year, which is much earlier than expected. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has predicted a positive growth in the second half of FY21.

Take a look at the recently published Q2 data — manufacturing PMI is above 50 for the fourth straight month; the Nomura India Business Resumption Index (NIBRI) reached 89.2 last month, only 11 percentage points lower than pre-Covid-19 levels; growth in other trends such as foreign policy investment, foreign direct investment (FDI) and corporate bond market inflows point to strong investor faith in India's economic resilience. Besides, upwards revisions by rating agencies in India's GDP forecast are all telling the same story — that we have kicked off the rebound phase.

This recovery sentiment has been buoyed largely by the bold leadership of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, and frequent policy interventions by the central government. Over the last eight months, the government has not just expanded the ambit of its Covid-19 response strategy by pooling in massive resources for virus control and acquiring vaccination, but has simultaneously employed the Keynesian prescription for recession, ie spending (worth ₹20 lakh crore) to boost aggregate demand. This reflected in the recently-announced stimulus package, which focused on resetting demand by introducing new employment schemes for the formal sector workforce. It is worth noting that unemployment levels are currently on a decline; the 6.7% unemployment rate for September was lower than the pre-Covid-19 level of 7.6% in February. Besides, fiscal stimulus and tax rebates for growth-critical sectors, such as housing, would have spillover effects, thus indirectly boosting demand-led growth.

Looking at all three stimulus packages, it is clear that the government's fiscal response has been calibrated, where it has made judicious choices in spending, especially with regard to continuation or expansion of certain schemes. The one that stands out is the extension of the 100% credit guarantee scheme to 26 stressed sectors. Similarly, incentives to firms through the expansion of production linked incentive (PLI) schemes worth ₹1.46 lakh crore for 10 new sectors will give a boost to the manufacturing

sector, and result in long-term benefits for the economy. A calculated restraint in spending the money of taxpayers is critical in the face of limited fiscal space.

What is equally laudable is that the government has stayed on the ball in taking small steps to forge the big picture of an Aatmanirbhar Bharat. While fixing the broken, it also unleashed structural reforms across various sectors that promise far-reaching benefits for the economy. For instance, the liberalisation of the notoriously rigid formal labour market would expedite India's upward movement in the ease of doing business rankings, and attract further investments.

Since 2014, India has moved up 79 positions in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business rankings. Reforms and timely fiscal interventions in other critical sectors are already showing positive results: The Gross Value Added for three sectors (agriculture, manufacturing and utilities) has been positive in Q2, as compared to just one (agriculture) in Q1 this year.

This positive sentiment is not just evident in growth indicators, but can be seen among the people as well. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept the by-elections in seven states, besides improving its performance to return to power in Bihar.

The leitmotif of the government's economic and policy efforts is to open up more windows for India to gain from the current vacuum in the global supply chain. At the same time, there will be a sustained focus on reforms to enable a conducive environment for start-ups, micro, small and medium enterprises, and other businesses, and propel a global market for local products.

For now, the government's prognosis for the near future is as follows. The first priority is to keep the pandemic spread under control, and thus, eliminate the possibility of facing a second wave of the virus. The second is to sustain the momentum of recovery, so that it enters the positive territory by the end of the third quarter.

The Covid-19 battle is proving to be a long-drawn-out one, where all the countries have seen severe output losses this fiscal year.

However, with India's impressive pace of recovery, the declining graph of active Covid-19 cases, and with the vaccination distribution blueprint in place, perhaps, the light at the end of the tunnel is not as far as it seems.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 15-12-2020

Budget 2021-22 to push infra spending, have vibrancy to ensure economic revival: FM

PTI

Pace of disinvestment will pick up in the months to come, says Nirmala Sitharaman

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Tuesday the upcoming Budget for 2021-22 will sustain the momentum

of public spending on infrastructure and have a "vibrancy" to ensure the economic revival continues.

She also said the pace of disinvestment, which has been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, will pick up in the months to come.

"We shall definitely sustain the momentum of public spending in infrastructure. Because that is the one way we assure that the multipliers will work and the economy's revival will be sustainable...."

"I am conscious that the forthcoming Budget will have a vibrancy that is so required for the economy's revival, sustainable revival," she said at the Assocham Foundation Week.

The Budget for the 2021-22 fiscal is expected to be tabled in Parliament on February 1.

With regard to the government's stake sale programme, she said the pace of disinvestment will now gain "lot of momentum" and cases where the companies already have Cabinet approval will be taken up in all earnestness.

"Disinvestment will be happening, corporatisation of banks....they should be able to raise money from the market, even that emphasis is being given," she said, adding the government has taken a lot of steps to deepen and widen the debt market.

The government had pegged disinvestment proceeds in current fiscal at Rs 2.10 lakh crore. So far this fiscal, it has raised Rs 10,500 crore through initial public offerings (IPOs) and offer for sale (OFS).

Further, the strategic sale process of two big companies—BPCL and Air India—is ongoing and the government has received "multiple expressions of interest" for them.

Sitharaman further said government borrowing was pegged at Rs 7 lakh crore in the Budget estimates for 2020-21, but it was later revised upwards to Rs 12 lakh crore.

As of November 20, to ensure that expenditure does not suffer, the government market borrowing has already touched Rs 9.05 lakh crore, which is about 68 per cent more than last year, she pointed out.

"So recognising that this is an unusual year, our borrowings have been kept absolutely at levels so that we can quickly put the money back in projects, in capital expenditure and so on, so that the money goes to the ground. This emphasis that the public infrastructure spending have to be kept up has been fully recognised," she added.

The minister said the emphasis on public expenditure for infrastructure through CPSEs will definitely be kept up and the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF) is doing its best to attract funds from abroad.

Also, the National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP) is being given priority, she added.

She also said with the COVID-19 vaccines set to be rolled out, “we can be lot more confident that this pandemic will be behind us and we shall surge forward as an economy.”
- PTI

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 13-12-2020

World Bank Approves \$85 Million in Grants for Afghanistan

(ATN)

KABUL - The World Bank has approved two grants totaling almost \$85 million from the International Development Association (IDA), as part of a \$393 million financial package to help Afghanistan overcome the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and improve access to clean water, sanitation, and public services.

In a statement issued on Friday, the IDA said COVID-19 has had a severe impact on Afghanistan both socially and economically.

“As they face the pandemic and ongoing conflict, many poor and vulnerable Afghan households subsist on daily earnings, have little or no access to water, sanitation, or healthcare,” the statement read.

In line with this, the IDA has granted \$85 million as part of two financial packages, which include additional support from the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), a multi-donor fund managed by the World Bank on behalf of 34 donors.

The IDA stated the financial packages are made up of \$50 million from the association for the Afghanistan Water, Sanitation, Hygiene, and Institutional Support (A-WASH) Project.

The grant will total \$200 million, including \$150 million from the ARTF and the project will improve access to and quality of water supply in Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat and strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan Urban Water Supply and Sewerage Corporation (AUWSSC) to deliver sustainable services and contribute to national efforts to manage COVID-19 and other disasters.

For the Second Additional Financing of the Citizens’ Charter Afghanistan Project (CCAP), the IDA has given \$35 million. This grant will total \$193 million, including \$158 million from the ARTF.

The project aims to improve the delivery of core infrastructure, emergency support, and social services to communities through strengthened Community Development Councils (CDCs).

Through this added financing, the Citizens’ Charter Project will expand its service delivery to 10 new cities across Afghanistan, continue to respond to the COVID-19 crisis among communities, provide critical assistance to Kuchi communities, increase employment through public

works, initiate peace projects in rural and urban areas, and continue to strengthen gender equality.

“Access to clean water, hygiene, and basic services is essential to prevent the transmission of infectious diseases, including COVID-19,” said Henry Kerali, World Bank Country Director for Afghanistan.

“The new grant under the A-WASH project will address the core health and water needs of Afghan communities. The additional grant for the Citizens’ Charter Afghanistan Project will build on the tremendous results in delivering services to communities recent years and expand access for more Afghans,” he said.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 6-12-2020

Bangladesh signs trade deal with Bhutan today

Refayet Ullah Mirdha

Bangladesh will ink its maiden preferential trade agreement (PTA) with Bhutan as the country looks to retain duty benefits following its graduation to a developing country from the least developed nation category.

Bangladesh is signing the deal with Bhutan as the country was the first one to recognise Bangladesh as an independent nation in 1971, said Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi at a press conference at State Guest House Sugandha yesterday.

Munshi and his Bhutanese counterpart will pen the deal. Bhutan recognised Bangladesh on December 6.

Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina and Bhutanese Premier Lotay Tshering will attend the ceremony virtually.

Under the deal, Bangladesh will enjoy duty benefit on the exports of 100 local products such as garments, processed agricultural goods and electronics. Bhutan will enjoy duty benefit on 34 products like fruits, Munshi said.

The agreement will come into effect immediately.

In the fiscal year of 2018-19, Bangladesh exported goods worth \$7.56 million and imported goods worth \$42.09 million, according to data from the commerce ministry.

The trade balance between Bangladesh and Bhutan is tilted towards Bhutan as Bangladesh is a major importer of stones used in the construction sector.

Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said the signing of the PTA with Bhutan was a good beginning.

Bangladesh can also look into signing comprehensive economic partnership agreements (CEPAs) with Bhutan and other major trading partners to retain the preferential trade benefits even after the graduation, said Rahman.

Bangladesh is set to make its status graduation to a developing country in 2024. In doing so, the country will lose preferential trade benefits as an LDC, except to the European Union, where the benefit would continue up to 2027 to help the country's transition.

Bhutan is also a member of the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) initiative, but it has not ratified the agreement yet.

"Bangladesh should negotiate more with Bhutan for the BBIN initiative so that the connectivity grows. The CEPA can ensure connectivity and investment between the two countries," Rahman said.

Bangladesh and Bhutan have agreed on establishing railway connectivity, which is expected to improve connectivity and boost trade and investment.

Both Bangladesh and Bhutan enjoy tariff benefit reciprocally under the South Asian Free Trade Area (Safta). So, Bangladesh will have to see how to access more beyond the Safta and under the PTA, the trade analyst said.

"Only the PTA is not enough; Bangladesh will need to sign CEPAs with major trading partners to secure more trade benefit after the graduation."

Bangladesh is ready to sign free trade agreements (FTAs) and PTAs with 11 more countries such as Nepal and Indonesia by June next year, said the commerce minister.

"We have limited time, and we would have to sign a lot of FTAs or PTAs with our major trading partners to protect our trade privileges after the graduation," he said.

Bangladesh might lose revenue from import tariffs due to the FTAs and PTAs, but it needs to go for the deals to protect the trade privileges, he said.

"Bhutan might be a small country, but we will have to start from a certain point. So, we started with Bhutan as we have an emotional relationship with Bhutan," said Munshi.

Commerce Secretary Md Jafar Uddin said although Bangladesh would lose tariff from import to some extent, studies show that a lot of jobs would be created in the country and exports would grow.

"We can't sit idle. We will have to move, as we will lose duty privileges in 2024. We have to sign such agreements with our trading partners," he said.

There is a 30 per cent duty on garment imported by Bhutan, which buys around \$2 million worth of apparel from external sources every year.

"So far, we exported a little over \$300,000 worth of goods in a single year. We see opportunities everywhere, especially in South Asia," said Rubana Huq, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, recently.

Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh, said the signing of the PTA with Bhutan was a tiny step for a long jump.

"Bangladesh will not have any economic impact on signing the PTA, but it has a learning point. We can learn a lot from the signing of such PTAs. We can learn how to negotiate," he said.

Bangladesh needs to sign trade deals with major trading partners like China, India, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the EU to retain trade benefits. So, the government is desperately lobbying with trading partners to sign either FTAs or PTAs.

The PTAs constitute an exception to the general most-favoured-nation provision of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), where all WTO members impose on each other the same non-discriminatory tariff.

All WTO members, sans Mongolia, have signed at least one PTA.

Bangladesh has begun negotiations with the Asean so that the country can grab more of its market share within the region.

Currently, Bangladesh, as an LDC, enjoys zero-duty benefits, preferential trade benefits and regional trade benefits on exports to 38 countries, including the EU countries.

Also, in the US, Bangladesh gets a zero-duty benefit for 97 per cent of its products, excluding garments, the country's main export item. Nevertheless, the US is the single largest export destination for the country.

Bangladesh will face competition in the EU after graduation as Vietnam has already signed an FTA with the bloc.

Some 74 per cent of Bangladesh's export earnings come under preferential trade as an LDC. Of the income, 64 per cent comes from the EU and 10 per cent from Japan, Canada and other developed countries.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 15-12-2020

BD to make most progress on sustainable energy: WB

Business Correspondent

Bangladesh alongside Ethiopia, Nigeria and Tanzania, have made the most progress in adopting policies on sustainable energy, among countries with higher electricity access deficits, said a new World Bank (WB) report.

According to RISE 2020, a new WB report charting global progress on energy policies, said nearly every country in the world saw advancements in sustainable energy policy between 2017 and 2019, but the most rapid improvements were in sub-Saharan Africa.

It said globally policy progress overall is slower than in the past, particularly around renewable energy and energy efficiency, said a WB release.

RISE - Regulatory Indicators for Sustainable Energy - 2020 measures policy progress in 138 countries on renewable energy, energy efficiency, electricity access, and access to clean cooking - the four target areas of Sustainable Development Goal 7 (SDG7), which calls for achieving access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all by 2030.

"We must continue to push forward on the progress made before the pandemic hit. The prospect of a post-pandemic recovery and low carbon growth presents policy makers with opportunities to accelerate adoption of sustainable energy policies, and to quicken the pace towards achieving universal access to energy," the press release quoted WB Vice President Makhtar Diop as saying.

According to the report, policy progress from 2017 to 2019 has accelerated for access to electricity and clean cooking.

BSS adds: Policies for mini grids and stand-alone power systems showed the most increase in adoption, reflecting the growing role of distributed energy for electricity access relative to the grid. Ethiopia, Nigeria and Tanzania also advanced in policy on consumer affordability and utility transparency.

When it comes to clean cooking, 2017-2019 saw large gains in Sub-Saharan African countries, notably Benin, Kenya, Nigeria, and Tanzania, although from a low base.

That follows notable progress since 2010 in upper- and lower-middle-income countries in Asia (Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, and Nepal) and Latin America (Guatemala).

Renewable energy policies are converging among higher-, middle-, and lower-income countries, after a decade of rapid advancement across the board.

Among the countries covered by RISE, only 37 percent had a national renewable energy target in 2010. By 2019, 99 percent of the world's countries had either established a comprehensive legal framework for renewable energy or begun to do so.

One third of countries worldwide had advanced policy frameworks for renewable energy, putting them in the report's "green zone", while 44 percent remained in the "yellow zone", suggesting room for improvement.

By 2019, nearly 70 percent of RISE countries had enacted energy efficiency plans. Approximately 75 percent of surveyed countries have adopted minimum HVAC energy performance standards and labeling measures. Yet improvement is still needed across the income spectrum; for example, some Persian Gulf countries have high income levels but lag in their uptake of efficiency measures.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the need for policies and regulations that mitigate the risk of global

shocks while also boosting investments in resilient energy systems and encouraging behavioral changes. RISE 2020: Sustaining the Momentum is the third edition of the report. The report is published by the World Bank with funding from the Energy Sector Management Assistance Programme (ESMAP).

SPOTLIGHT, KATHMANDU 8-12-2020

Nepal-India Agree To Amend Transit Treaty

By Agencies

An agreement has been reached to finalize amendments to the Nepal-India transit treaty and the rail service agreement between the two countries reports RSS.

According to national news agency, the proposal by Nepal for amendments and endorsement was taken positively by the Indian side, and will soon be finalized, the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies has said.

An agreement to this end was reached in a meeting held today through video conferencing of the Nepal-India Secretary-level inter-governmental committee formed to look into trade and transit related issues between the two countries. The Nepali team in the meeting was led by Secretary at the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies Dr Baikuntha Aryal and the Indian team by Indian Commerce Secretary Anup Wadhawan.

RSS says various matters relating to the trade and agreements reached between Nepal and India in the commerce sector, Nepal-India transit treatment, Nepal-India commerce treaty, Railway service agreement and agreement to control unofficial trade were discussed during the meeting, ministry spokesperson Urmila KC said.

According to the ministry, matters discussed in the bilateral dialogue were up-gradation of border customs, establishment of Nepal-India joint commercial forum, BBIN and MVA issues, quality and standards of trade goods of both the countries and problems facing trade affairs.

Both the sides have acknowledged the role of infrastructure along the cross-country border in trade promotion.

The Indian side has informed that it has already initiated the construction of integrated screening post in Nepalgunj and is preparing to put in place the same post in Bhairahawa checkpoint.

In the dialogue, Nepali side had extended gratefulness to Indian side for the construction of separate integrated customs screening posts in Birgunj and Biratnagar and also urged for the expansion and up-gradation of railway line in the posts.

The Indian side has informed that they would initiate discussion with concerned authorities to respond to the request of Nepali side to that end.

The Ministry has shared that Indian side was positive regarding the construction of dry port in Chadani Dodhara, construction of Integrated Check Post in Banbasa and extension of the railway service at the place.

An understanding has been made to prepare detail study report and concept report for construction of cross border economic zone.

Nepal has urged the Indian side to permit Nepal to use Asian Highway as traffic trouble was witnessed in Fulbari road, border crossing for vehicles and people on the India-Bangladesh border in course of bilateral trade with Bangladesh.

Expressing satisfaction over construction of joint commercial forum of private sector except government level among Nepal and India, both sides are to hold first meeting of the Forum in 2021 and Nepal is to take initiation for the same.

Nepal had raised the issue of imposing charge on anti-dumping and countervailing duties on jute and non-jute products this time too.

Nepal had urged to grant permission for the participation in government purchase process including Indian Food Corporation as Nepali Jute Industry has got ISI certificate of India.

Necessary decision would be taken after holding the discussion on this issue.

Secretaries of the both countries agreed to take ownership of all issues related to infrastructure, transit, trade and investment by the committee signed at Nepal India Inter-Government Sub-Committee held on December 3 and 4, 2020.

Both sides thanked each other of holding the discussion in a friendly environment, Spokesperson at the Ministry, Urmila KC told to RSS.

SPOTLIGHT, KATHMANDU 12-12-2020

Nepal and India Agree to Finalise Regulatory Modality to Export Nepal's Surplus Power To India

By New Spotlight Online

Nepal and India are also close to finalizing the regulatory modality for allowing Nepali power producers access to the Indian power market which will provide an outlet for Nepal's surplus power in the coming months.

This agreement was reached during the Power/Energy Secretaries of Nepal and India co-chaired the 8th meeting of Joint Steering Committee (JSC) on Cooperation in the Power sector which was held through video conferencing today.

Both sides discussed, inter alia, development of suitable rules and guidelines for allowing access to Nepali power

producers to Indian markets, development of energy banking mechanism, development of cross border high voltage transmission lines as well as reviewing the progress of the SJVN Limited- developed 900 MW Arun-III Hydro Electric Project in Nepal and agreeing to further facilitate its expeditious implementation.

Dinesh Kumar Ghimire, Secretary (Energy) of Nepal was assisted by representatives of various Ministries and Departments of Government of Nepal. The Joint Working Group meeting at the level of Joint Secretaries was held yesterday in preparation of this meeting.

Similarly, Sanjiv Nandan Sahai, Power Secretary, Government of India was accompanied by Ambassador of India to Nepal, Vinay Mohan Kwatra and a 17 member delegation drawn from various Ministries and public sector undertakings of Government of India including NHPC Limited, NTPC Limited and the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu

According to a press release issued by The Embassy of India Kathmandu, the JSC is the apex bilateral mechanism for enhancing and coordinating various Government-to-Government led initiatives in the power sector. The meeting reviewed the progress made on bilateral processes and initiatives in this sector.

Both Governments have been coordinating closely with each other in this sector. Consequently, progress made in the last five years in this sector has been exemplary.

This includes completion of South Asia's first cross border 400 KV transmission line at Muzaffarpur-Dhalkebar, agreement on funding modality for Gorakhpur-Butwal 400 KV line for which the construction will commence soon, and the brisk progress on the 900 MW Arun-III Hydro Electric Project.

Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to further strengthening the power sector cooperation between the two countries, including the development of an integrated grid, the building of more cross border transmission lines, as required, as well as investing in Nepal's hydro and solar power projects. The positive and wide-ranging discussions today are expected to further support the expansion in power sector cooperation between India and Nepal.

DAILY MIRROR, COLOMBO 2-12-2020

India pledges to deepen economic ties with SL

Nirmala Sitharaman

Sri Lanka yesterday received a strong pledge of commitment from its neighbouring giant, India, with its Finance Minister affirming improved assistance to help the government strengthen the national economy.

India's Finance and Corporate Affairs Minister Nirmala Sitharaman assured that India and its government will work together with Sri Lanka to mutually strengthen each

other's economy, a move which will allow people from both nations to prosper.

"I am happy to say that India shall engage with Sri Lankan authorities to make sure meaningful assistance, and interventions are made so that the economies of both countries can be developed simultaneously, and the benefits are shared among the people," said Sitharaman delivering the keynote address at Sri Lanka Economic Summit 2020 hosted by the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce (CCC).

She shared that the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, the Ministry of External Affairs, and her ministry will work together with Indian manufacturers and investors to look at Sri Lanka to deepen trade.

According to Sitharaman, the close geographic proximity and familiarity, which both nations enjoy, can result in better investments.

The minister added that to move in the proposed direction, the basic conditions, in terms of policy and its implementation must be in place to allow businesses to succeed in establishing partnerships.

She stressed that the private sector of India and Sri Lanka must engage with their respective governments to identify opportunities and highlight the regulatory interventions required for facilitation.

DAILY MIRROR, COLOMBO 5-12-2020

Budget 2021 and the External Sector in a Changing Global Order

The Collective for economic Democracy

Annual budgets announce the Government's priorities for the domestic economy. But we cannot address the historic challenges facing Sri Lanka without considering the global context. In our last article on the domestic implications of Budget 2021, we argued that it lacks meaningful proposals to rebuild an economy falling into depression and a society ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. These intersecting crises are affecting countries all over the world. But resolving them depends on our ability to recognise the specific implications for Sri Lanka. Given the country's historical challenges overcoming its political-economic dependency, what is the Government's strategy to address the external sector; particularly the balance of payment problems and growing geopolitical pressures?

In the inaugural Budget Speech, the Prime Minister proudly claimed: "We are at a time, when many countries have realised the geopolitical significance of our country." Indeed, many political analysts have similarly pontificated about Sri Lanka's ability to derive benefits from its supposedly increasing geopolitical significance. Different factions, ideologies, and interest groups promote ways of navigating the competing interests of China, India, the US, Japan, and the EU. We strongly disagree though with the

broadly celebratory assumption that these analysts share. Instead, we only see dangers for Sri Lanka in the context of heightened geopolitical tensions.

The lesson from our own past is obvious. Our inability to address the national question allowed for external actors to exacerbate the ethnic conflict, which then descended into a protracted civil war. Similarly, our current inability to address our economic problems has made us more vulnerable to the whims of external actors. This situation has been exacerbated by the long neglect of domestic production after the neoliberal turn in 1977 when we turned our back on the critical question of self-sufficiency. We are now condemned to go with the begging bowl to powerful actors, who will extract from Sri Lanka, and especially its working people, according to their strategic interests.

The responsibility for the fractures which external actors now seek to exploit – from the polarisation of our diverse society to tremendous economic inequalities – rests squarely upon those who have wielded state power. They have promoted the class interests of the elite to the detriment of the working people. This process in turn has led us onto the unsustainable path we are currently on. Therefore, understanding Sri Lanka's position in a precarious geopolitical and global economic situation requires a deeper class analysis.

Meanwhile, the opposition claims an IMF agreement would strengthen "investor confidence." The opposition's naivete regarding the interests of global investors, who are running to safe assets, parallels the government's extravagant claims that it can leverage the interests of powerful external actors

A sober and much more realistic inquiry contrasts with fantastical speculation about the gains Sri Lanka can enjoy by supposedly playing off one external power against another. Marx and Engels made the point clear in the Communist Manifesto: "Though not in substance, yet in form, the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle. The proletariat of each country must, of course, first settle matters with its own bourgeoisie." In our own moment, to solve global problems, we must first challenge those in and out of political power who claim to champion Sri Lankans, while pushing elite interests. The latter's interests are reflected in geopolitical manoeuvring vis-à-vis external actors.

Dependency and External Pressures

For a long time, Sri Lanka has had a dependent economy. Colonialism ravaged Sri Lanka for centuries, and neocolonial extraction undermined the promise of postcolonial liberation. Despite the challenges arising from this situation, the Government has not backed up its rhetoric about import substitution. The lack of foreign earnings to pay for imports provoked the initial shift. But the government has avoided allocating the necessary resources in the Budget to increase local production. Meanwhile, the opposition claims an IMF agreement

would strengthen “investor confidence.” The opposition’s naivete regarding the interests of global investors, who are running to safe assets, parallels the government’s extravagant claims that it can leverage the interests of powerful external actors.

But even as we critique this system, we must start by getting our house in order. There is no easy salvation from abroad, either in becoming a willing appendage of China or by getting embroiled in more loans from Western investors that are backed by the IMF

The actual circumstances could not be clearer. Sri Lanka’s debt is under attack by rating agencies, whose complicity with global finance capital is no secret. As a result, it has been reduced to junk bond status. Under growing desperation, many may see an IMF agreement, which would be contingent on stringent measures such as austerity and privatisation, as a way out of the tremendous premium on interest rates that would likely be imposed on Sri Lanka if it attempts to borrow again in the global financial markets. But it is a tremendous leap of faith to assume that such an agreement will alleviate Sri Lanka’s foreign debt problems; in addition, of course, to the massive social damage it would create.

In this context, we must also call out bilateral actors for their self-serving rhetoric. The EU, for example, has resumed its tutelage about the virtues of the global market. It has condemned Sri Lanka’s moves to restrict imports. The EU, however, has no right to preach here, given its own legacy of colonial and neocolonial extraction. Even its supposedly “pro-poor” programmes like GSP+ simply incorporated Sri Lanka into low-wage supply chains. This did little to upgrade the country’s access within higher value-added industries.

Under growing desperation, many may see an IMF agreement, which would be contingent on stringent measures such as austerity and privatisation, as a way out of the tremendous premium on interest rates that would likely be imposed on Sri Lanka if it attempts to borrow again in the global financial markets

Similarly, in view of its Secretary of State’s visit, the US, having long pursued disastrous interventions curtailing socialist and even modest social-democratic experiments in Third World countries, is also in no moral position to dictate Sri Lanka’s external strategy. This includes the US’s attempts to chasten the Government in its relationship with China. Sri Lanka must decide for itself on the way forward for its own external relations, whether it be with India, China or other emerging powers, from the vantage point of building an egalitarian society.

At the same time, we must remain vigilant of the dangers of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism’s attempt to appropriate vaguely left-sounding demands about sovereignty. Sinhala Buddhist nationalism identifies the problem as one rooted in a cultural conception of the “West,” rather than the political-economic relationships that reflect our own domestic class structure. The reality is that the global

hegemonic order will not necessarily become more egalitarian simply because the US is experiencing a crisis. As progressives, we must push ourselves toward a clear analysis of the ways in which the ruling class, through its right-wing nationalist ideologues continue to maintain power by cultivating divisions among the oppressed within and between countries.

In the meantime, the government is unwilling to begin the long process of overhauling the domestic economy by pursuing redistributive measures. Instead, it draws from the hope of redemption by external actors, such as China. Ironically, despite its loud championing of national sovereignty, it erases the collective agency of Sri Lankans, who, we must constantly re-emphasise, ultimately control their own destiny. We must look for solutions within, not outwards. In contrast, following the Government’s path is a recipe for disaster. It is ideologically blind to the fact that China, for example, is embroiled in its own national political and economic contradictions, including growing inequalities. Accordingly, will we simply substitute the US for China, while remaining trapped within the global financial capitalist order? Will we seek out more neoliberal projects for global finance such as the Port City and the sale of strategic assets, which will further erode the autonomy of our economy?

No Quick Fixes

The Government is caught in a bind, given that its own nationalist base may rhetorically oppose such deals. As a result, it appears to be working through nationalist ideologies to convince its supporters that China’s support is critical to strengthening the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist project in Sri Lanka. This strategy will likely compound existing ethnic and religious divides, even as we find it increasingly difficult to contain the political-economic fallout of depression. In our last article, we argued that the first step to rebuilding the domestic economy requires investing in rural areas and engaging in redistributive measures, such as wealth and property taxes.

On the other hand, what is the alternative to the crisis in the external sector? Simply put, we must prioritise self-sufficiency in our global engagement. On a superficial level, the Government has recognised the external trap it is in. This is evident from its willingness to break with decades-old neoliberal ideology and impose import restrictions. It has even pointed in the direction of import substitution. But its lack of viable plans for public investment combined with its appeals to an external saviour exposes the emptiness of its economic programme vis-à-vis the much deeper reconstruction necessary to overcome the depression.

We can develop an alternative perspective by engaging critically with our own past. Historically, Sri Lanka was an active participant in the Non-Aligned Movement formed in the mid-1950s during the period of decolonisation and the Cold War. It subsequently became a proponent of the New International Economic Order during the global economic downturn in the 1970s. We

may aspire to similar solutions now, including initiatives to restructure global debt. But those interventions emerged after decades of patient anti-colonial work forging solidarity between colonised peoples and Third World countries. It included input from important economists and intellectuals who posed important questions, such as Samir Amin, who asked whether “de-linking” can be achieved, and if so, how.

Of course, in the long run, the egalitarian solutions that Sri Lanka could propose in conjunction with other countries would require working together to strengthen the collective bargaining capacity of those countries that have long been at the receiving end of the unequal global order. Indeed, if we examine the free trade regime under neoliberal globalisation over the last few decades, both Western countries and China have gained much from it, while most of the Third World economies have been the losers. But even as we critique this system, we must start by getting our house in order. There is no easy salvation from abroad, either in becoming a willing appendage of China or by getting embroiled in more loans from Western investors that are backed by the IMF.

We must confront the daunting challenges by engaging in an intensive programme to rebuild the domestic economy devastated by economic depression. We can only embark on this path by confronting our political weaknesses, such as ethnoreligious polarisation and the consolidation of xenophobic nationalist mobilisation under the shadow of an authoritarian turn away from democracy. In addition, we must dismantle the structures of dispossession that for decades have undermined self-sufficiency, and the ability of working people to sustain themselves. We must engage in self-critical reflection, rather than daydreaming about Sri Lanka as a kingmaker in a game in which it is ultimately the pawn of powerful external actors. We must first embark on the difficult task of building economic democracy, with an eye toward rebuilding solidarity in the global periphery. Otherwise, we will continue to be at the receiving end from one great power or the other, regardless of the grandiose promises made in Budget 2021.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 4-12-2020

Managing the economy

Riaz Khokhar

For successful economic diplomacy, Pakistan will have to work out its trade policies, domestic distribution of foreign economic assistance, product sophistication and diversification, and business environment.

For starters, Pakistan will have to get the finance and commerce ministries to boost trade and discontinue the current practice of using trade policies to address fiscal deficits and revenue shortfalls.

The Ministry of Finance, including the Federal Bureau of Revenue (FBR), undercut the dividends of Pakistan’s

external economic engagement in two ways. The finance ministry borrows from foreign commercial banks or diverts the foreign economic assistance potentially destined for infrastructure, agriculture, education and health sectors to address the fiscal deficits, improve balance of payments, finance commodities such as oil from the Middle East, or for debt repayments.

This in turn leads to inequitable and unfair distribution of invaluable foreign funding and leaves the country’s human development challenges largely unaddressed.

On the other hand, the FBR fails miserably in its basic job responsibilities of generating revenue through collecting taxes, including through widening the tax base, and instead trespasses on the territory of the Ministry of Commerce to set tariff rates and employ import tariffs to fix the fiscal revenue gap.

In short, Pakistan’s trade policy is rendered subordinate to finance and taxation policies, and import tariffs are employed as an instrument of revenue-generation in lieu of conducting trade.

The FBR’s heavy reliance on import tariffs has resulted in the highest weighted average tariff rates in Pakistan as compared to other countries with annual exports of over \$20 billion. Where the global weighted average stands at 2.7 percent, South Asian 5.9 percent, ASEAN 2.5 percent, China’s 3.8 percent, and India’s 5.8 percent, Pakistan’s average has varied between 11 and 13 percent for the past several years.

Pakistan does not seem to have learned from its history of the severe impact of high tariff rates on the level of exports and overall economy. In the year 2000, when the country’s weighted average tariff (WAT) was 23.1 percent, exports were worth \$2.9 billion only. As the WAT reduced to 8.9 percent in 2014, the country’s exports increased to the highest level of \$25.1 billion (an increase of 173 percent).

Successive governments, however, reversed the course of tariff liberalization and applied increasingly more tariffs. As the WAT reached 11.6 percent in the FY19, exports also witnessed a slide to \$23 billion.

Currently, 48 percent of Pakistan’s total tax revenue comes from import tariffs, in contrast to that of the export-oriented economies of Malaysia (1.6 percent), Turkey (2.4 percent), Indonesia (2.6 percent), South Korea (3.2 percent), China (3.9 percent), and India (12.8 percent).

The heightened tariff rates have increased the cost of imports, which in turn has dented industrial competitiveness by protecting inefficient producers, who then become less export-oriented and manufacture goods for domestic consumption.

As a result, the share of industrial production as a percentage of GDP has decreased from 26.4 percent in 2010 to around 18 percent in 2019, and the contribution of exports to GDP has declined from 13.5 percent in 2010 to only 7 percent in 2019.

This demonstrates how merely a structural distortion in the role of the finance and commerce ministries affects the overall economy of a country. The other problem identified at the start is the unfair management of foreign economic assistance coming from development partners in the form of bilateral and multilateral financing.

In FY20-21, the total foreign inflows for Pakistan were \$2.7 billion, of which only \$317 million (12 percent) was allocated for projects financing, whereas \$1.4 billion (46 percent) was appropriated for budgetary support, \$1 billion (37 percent) in terms of time safe deposits, and \$0.14 billion (5 percent) to repay foreign commercial loans. The largest chunk of foreign development assistance that could go for education, health, poverty alleviation, water management and agricultural development was redirected to meeting fiscal and balance of payment deficits.

It is then no surprise that the country's development partners are presumably frustrated at seeing their funds being spent on fiscal and current account payments instead of improving human development indices, adding more electricity to grid stations, or transforming the agriculture sector from subsistence level to commercially engaged.

The third issue in Pakistan's external economic engagement is the lack of product sophistication and diversification, and a vision for a diversified market access.

Nearly 70 percent of Pakistan's exports comprise cotton manufactures and agriproducts. On the contrary, advanced economies export highly sophisticated products like automotive manufactures, telecommunication, electronic data processing, integrated circuits, and pharmaceutical goods.

In the post-Covid-19 era, many advanced economies are also shifting to providing technologically driven digital services.

The 2019 Global Competitive Index rated Pakistan at the lowest in South Asia at 110th, whereas India stood at 68th, Sri Lanka 84th, Bangladesh 105th, and Nepal 108th. The major reasons for Pakistan's lack of competitiveness and inability to sophisticate and diversify its products and markets are the inefficient production technology and skills, failure to meet international quality/quantity compliance requirements, dearth of research and development, and increased cost of exports and imports.

These are the very reasons that Pakistan has failed to increase its exports even after having free trade agreements with the advanced economies of China and Malaysia, and the preferential trade agreement with Indonesia. Due to the lack of product sophistication and diversified mix of tradable commodities, other advanced economies like Australia, Japan, and South Korea find it difficult to sign free trade agreements with Pakistan.

Pakistan's Look Africa Initiative may be more of a sign of having uncompetitive and unsophisticated products than a

diversified vision of economic diplomacy, which would otherwise prioritise immediate neighbourhood in South and Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region.

All in all, Pakistan's external economic engagement is not just beset with the challenge of rectifying trade and finance policies, but also that of focusing on product sophistication and diversification and diverse market access, and reducing strict -- and often ambiguous -- regulations as well as ensuring protection of intellectual property rights.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 8-12-2020

Pakistan secures \$873mln debt relief from Paris Club

Israr Khan

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan will get \$873 million worth of debt servicing suspension from the Paris Club of creditor nations, the Paris Club said on Monday.

The Paris Club said it is close to fully achieve the implementation of the debt service suspension initiative (DSSI) of around \$2.5 billion with 36 countries. In November, the Economic Coordination Committee of the cabinet allowed the economic affairs division to proceed with the formal request for availing the G-20 debt relief for the extended period from January to June 2021 under the Covid support. Subsequently, the federal cabinet also approved it and then bilateral debt service suspension agreements were signed.

Paris Club creditors will continue to closely coordinate with non-Paris Club G20 members and other stakeholders in the ongoing implementation of the DSSI and its extension so as to provide maximum support to beneficiary countries.

After having agreed to extend the DSSI by six months until 30 June 2021, Paris Club members will examine by the time of the 2021 spring meetings of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund if the economic and financial situation requires extending further the DSSI by another six months.

Furthermore, Paris Club members have endorsed a "common framework for debt treatments beyond the DSSI" and welcome the decision taken by the extraordinary G20 finance ministers and central bank governors' meeting to also endorse this common framework.

Recognizing that efficiently addressing ongoing debt vulnerabilities will require a strong creditors' coordination, the common framework sets out a multilateral approach to facilitate debt treatments for DSSI-eligible countries by Paris Club and G20 creditors in a timely, coordinated, and orderly manner, while ensuring a broad participation among creditors, including the private sector through the comparability of treatment principle.

This framework represents a major breakthrough in the international financial architecture and will strengthen the coordination between Paris Club creditors and other G20 creditors at a time when debt vulnerabilities are high, particularly in low-income countries.

“The Paris Club has worked actively to implement swiftly the DSSI in order to respond without delay to requests from eligible countries. It has once again proven its effectiveness and ability to coordinate closely with non-Paris Club G20 members,” said Emmanuel Moulin, chairperson of the Paris Club. “To meet the current debt challenges many countries are facing, the Paris Club continues to show its leadership in designing and implementing multilateral initiatives on debt issues. It remains strongly committed to implementing the DSSI extension and the Common Framework in the coming months.”

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 9-12-2020

Next five years’ economic growth not encouraging

Khaleeq Kiani

ISLAMABAD: With the highest population growth rate in the region, Pakistan is already the fifth most populous nation in the world but the economic growth outlook at least for the next four to five years is not encouraging.

“Pakistan needs a high economic growth rate, 7-8 per cent, for the next 30 years to absorb the new entrants to the labour force,” said a summary of the Population Situation Analysis (PSA) launched by the Ministry of Planning and Development, which was finalised with the support of international development partners.

Speaking on the occasion, President Dr Arif Alvi said Pakistan had adopted a multi-pronged approach to check population growth and address other issues like mother and child health, malnutrition and stunted growth.

The strategy included women empowerment through financial inclusion besides creating awareness about the importance of gap in births through various means of communication and by taking on board different segments of the society, including the ulema, he added.

Report projects population to reach 383 million by 2050

Dr Alvi said frequent pregnancies led to stunted growth in a child and affected the mother’s health, adding that it was important to educate people on birth spacing and use of contraceptives.

The report noted that the status of human capital factors was not lending support to the potential harnessing of the demographic dividend. Structural inequalities in social and economic opportunities shape the demographic transition and affect population outcomes, associated with local contraceptive prevalence and higher fertility level as well as maternal and child health care.

Although Pakistan has been classified as a lower middle income country since 2008 and its per capita GDP in 2018 reached \$1,565, demographic and some social and health indicators are comparable to those of least developed countries, the report said.

It said the current assessment of the population situation in Pakistan pointed to the prevailing high-level annual population growth, amounting to 2.4pc for the period 1998-2017.

The population increased six fold between 1951 and 2017 from 34 million to 208 million and is projected to reach 263 million by 2030 and 383 million by 2050 – an increase by 84pc during the period 2017-2050 unless serious actions are taken to halt the growth and rationalise population dynamics.

The assessment showed this growth confirmed the slow pace of the demographic transition process because of slow decline of fertility at national and provincial levels.

In 2017, out of about 33 million married couples, there were approximately 8.9 million users of modern methods and of these 4.9 million had received their method in the past one year, indicating that the services footprints are very small – 15pc utilisation of services in a given year.

This indicated that little progress had been made in family planning, an area critical to maternal, newborn, infant and child health and survival and with major spinoff effects on women’s agency, education and labour force participation as well as impacting environment and quality of life, although a few sexual and reproductive health areas have witnessed notable progress. The progress has been uneven by the component of reproductive health and across region, urban-rural area, income groups and other important age and parity sub-groups.

The slow onset of demographic transition, the persisting high fertility level and the low contraceptive prevalence are clearly delaying the potential harnessing of the demographic dividend. A sustainable decline in fertility presents the economy with an opportunity through the surge in the relative size of the working-age population (15-64) and at the same time a gradual decline in the percentage of the population in the age group below 15 years.

The report also noted that Pakistan suffered not only from a low economic growth but also an inequitable distribution of the gains from such growth and associated opportunities of education, employment and income. This is particularly true for the female population.

The economic profile of the country, however, indicated that economic growth mainly financed by consumption was not creating enough employment opportunities for middle and higher skills and social exclusion by various characteristics was highly prevalent and seemed to be culturally rooted and was reflected in economic disparities.

Also, although female labour force participation rate has increased from 13.7pc in 1990 to 20.3pc in 2020, it is still very low. The status of women remains a challenging issue and the country ranks near the bottom of the world's countries on indicators such as women health and survival, education attainment and equal economic participation and opportunity. Moreover women and children are showing one of the highest levels of malnutrition, undernourishment and childhood stunting in the world and only 15pc of children consume a minimally acceptable diet.

Alarming, Pakistan has the highest percentage of population experiencing dietary energy consumption poverty, compared to India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

In 2019, 24pc of Pakistan's population had insufficient food intake to meet dietary energy requirements. The PSA advised that the debate and action about inequality and poverty should not only be limited to income but it needs to be extended to focus on access to health, education and unemployment.

Pakistan has a relatively weak industrial and manufacturing sector, with little capacity to absorb new entrants into appropriate jobs. The situation of the service sector is not different either.

Planning Minister Asad Umar said the population control in Pakistan should have gained momentum much earlier due to which Pakistan became the fifth most populous country in the region, having the highest population growth rate.

The government is committed to deploying efforts to reduce the population growth rate for the health of mothers, children and families and the prosperity of Pakistan by reducing the impending burden on its resources, he added.

Planning Commission Deputy Chairman Mohammad Jehanzeb Khan said Pakistan's total fertility rate was 3.5pc, where un-met need for family planning was 17.3pc and the contraceptive prevalence rate was 34.2pc.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 11-12-2020

Pakistan's economy recovering: ADB report

Mehtab Haider

ISLAMABAD: The Asian Development Bank (ADB) said Pakistan's economy is recovering, particularly in manufacturing and construction, supported by government's emergency relief.

In a brief comment on seven pages, Asian Development Outlook Supplement released by ADB Thursday discussed the largest economies of its member states but it did not include Pakistan on account of sharing many details in its seven-page report.

Despite the continuous spread of COVID-19, most economies have continued to relax containment measures, having deemed strict lockdowns to be economically unsustainable. Variation in the intensity of containment reflects the state of outbreaks in different economies. Containment remains relatively stringent in Central, South, and Southeast Asia, where outbreaks have continued in some economies and reemerged in others. Containment is less stringent in East Asia and the Pacific where outbreaks are under control or absent.

With improved prospects for India, South Asia's growth forecast for 2020 is revised up to from 6.8% contraction to 6.1%. The sub-regional growth projection for 2021 is revised up slightly from 7.1% to 7.2%. Having contracted by 23.9% in Q1 of fiscal year 2020 (FY2020, ending March 31,2021), the Indian economy began to normalise after containment measures started in ease in June, with economic contraction in Q2 FY2020 narrowing to 7.5%, better than expected.

Developing Asia is now forecast to contract by 0.4% in 2020, less than the 0.7% contraction envisaged in the Asian Development Outlook 2020 update in September. Growth will rebound to 6.8% in 2021, but prospects diverge within the region.

Growth forecasts for Central Asia and the Pacific are unchanged from September. Central Asia is still projected to contract by 2.1% this year, and the Pacific economies by 6.1% as global tourism continues to languish. Depressed demand and low oil prices will keep regional inflation in check at 2.8% in 2020 and 1.9% in 2021.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 12-12-2020

Pakistan signed up for \$10.5bn foreign loan in FY20

Khaleeq Kiani

ISLAMABAD: The PTI government contracted \$10.447 billion worth of new foreign loans from multilateral institutions and commercial banks during the fiscal year 2019-20, almost one-fourth higher than previous year's \$8.4bn.

According to Annual Report on Foreign Economic Assistance 2019-20 released by Ministry of Economic Affairs, 99 per cent of the new commitments were for loans and the remaining 1pc in grant commitments.

Out of the total new agreements of \$10.447bn, more than \$6.79bn financing agreements were signed with multilateral agencies, \$3.463bn with foreign commercial banks and \$193 million with bilateral lenders.

The report said the high level of commercial financing worth \$3.463bn — accounting for 33pc of the total new commitments — had been secured from commercial banks to refinance maturing commercial debt during the year.

Country received \$10.7bn in foreign assistance during same period

Asian Development Bank (ADB) emerged as the largest lender with new commitments of 30pc, followed by World Bank 22pc, Islamic Development Bank (IDB) 7pc and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) 5pc. These financial institutions extended financing of about 98pc of the total new commitments.

The report said that 69pc of the new commitments during FY2019-20 were made under the category of budgetary support. “This high level of budgetary support was secured mainly to offset socio-economic impact of Covid-19 pandemic and to meet the higher external financing requirements for external debt retirements,” it added.

About 26pc of the new commitments were allocated for project financing and 5pc for commodity financing.

The new commitments were higher than budgeted in view of the Covid-19 pandemic. An amount of \$7.5bn had been committed as budgetary support, of which \$4bn was committed by multilaterals as programme financing and the remaining from foreign commercial banks.

The major share (40pc) of new commitments was meant for transport & communication in FY2019-20, followed by 19pc for health, 12pc for physical planning and housing, 10pc for rural development and poverty reduction, 9pc for power sector and 6pc for agriculture.

On the other hand, the total disbursement of foreign loans in FY2019-20 amounted to \$10.7bn — slightly lower than \$10.8bn during same period of FY2018-19. Of these, 97pc disbursements were in the shape of loans and 3pc grants.

The disbursements included \$6.5bn by multilateral and bilateral lenders as compared to \$4.1bn last year, registering a growth of 59pc. In addition, the government also raised \$3.4bn from foreign commercial sources to meet its external debt obligations and support balance of payments.

Disbursements of \$10.7bn were mainly under the projects and programme loans or grants from multilateral, bilateral and financial institutions. This included \$5.645bn or 53pc of total disbursements from the multilaterals, mainly ADB, IDB, AIIB and World Bank. An amount of \$3,373m or 32pc of the total disbursements was from foreign commercial banks mainly for refinancing of maturing commercial debt. Another \$1.644bn or 15pc of the disbursements was from bilateral lenders, particularly Saudi Arabia, China and the United Kingdom.

As of June 30, 2020, Pakistan’s total external public debt amounted to \$77.9bn, compared to \$73.4bn during the same period last year, showing a growth of 6pc.

The report showed total external public debt from three key sources — 51pc multilateral debt, followed by 31pc bilateral debt, including China’s SAFE deposits, and the remaining 18pc from foreign commercial banks and institutions, including Eurobonds and Sukuk.

After accounting for total repayments and fresh disbursements, net transfers to the government during FY2019-20 amounted to \$1.8bn. The report said the stock of external loans obtained via market-based instruments declined by \$2.062bn in bonds and commercial borrowing and the share of concessional external loans with longer maturity increased by \$3.87bn in multilateral and bilateral loans, showing a relative improvement in external public debt stock.

The report said the net transfers had remarkably declined after 2018. “Despite elevated level of external debt servicing, Pakistan has successfully discharged its record debt servicing during FY2019-20 by successfully mobilising external resources and shifting focus from short-term commercial high-cost liquidity to long-term concessional flows,” it said, claiming credit for prudent external debt management and growing confidence of lenders.

The economic affairs ministry said that about 70pc of the total external public debt consisted of loans on fixed interest rates as of June 30, 2020, while the remaining 30pc loans were obtained on floating interest rates.

Fixed interest rates are fully predictable interest payments and pre-defined amortisation schedule. In contrast, floating interest rate is anchored to the prevailing market conditions and is usually indexed with London Inter-Bank Offered Rate (Libor). Interest payments of floating rate debt change according to the change in the prevailing Libor rates.

During FY2019-20, Pakistan paid \$10.4bn on account of debt servicing of external public loans, including principal payment of \$8.5bn and \$1.9bn in interest payments.

III – INTERNAL AFFAIRS

| | Subject | Newspapers/Periodicals | Date | Page |
|-----|---|----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| | INDIA Political Developments | | | |
| | CRISIS of leaders in Rahul camp Editorial | The Kashmir Times, Jammu | 3-12-2020 | 29 |
| 1. | Decimation of parliamentary democracy is complete: Congress slams government over no winter session of Parliament States Politics | The Tribune, Chandigarh | 15-12-2020 | 29 |
| 2. | First Bihar, now Hyderabad: A new political blueprint featuring BJP and AIMIM to disarm regional satraps? By Vibha Sharma | The Tribune, Chandigarh | 5-12-2020 | 30 |
| 3. | ‘Wont yield to blackmail by BJP’s friends during polls’, says Mamata Banerjee By Shiv Sahay | The Hindu, Delhi | 5-12-2020 | 30 |
| 4. | BJP remained busy trying to topple Maharashtra govt: CM Thackeray | The Tribune, Chandigarh | 13-12-2020 | 31 |
| 5. | Left watches closely as BJP, Trinamool fight it out for political space in West Bengal By Ravi S Singh | The Tribune, Chandigarh | 4-12-2020 | 32 |
| 6. | After Dubbaka victory, BJP now gears up for Tirupati parliamentary bypolls AFGHANISTAN | India Today, New Delhi | 14-12-2020 | 32 |
| 7. | Abdullah Faces Criticism for Incomplete Reconciliation Council | Outlook Afghanistan, Kabul | 5-12-2020 | 33 |
| 8. | High Council for National Reconciliation holds first maiden meeting | Outlook Afghanistan, Kabul | 5-12-2020 | 33 |
| 9. | Ceasefire will be on Agenda in Talks: Taliban Spokesman | Outlook Afghanistan, Kabul | 6-12-2020 | 35 |
| 10. | Afghan Parliament to Shift to Electronic Voting, Attendance System | Outlook Afghanistan, Kabul | 9-12-2020 | 35 |
| 11. | MPs Criticize Govt’s Development Office for Ignoring Parliament | Outlook Afghanistan, Kabul | 12-12-2020 | 35 |
| 12. | Attacking the system one step at a time By Anil Giri | The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu | 4-12-2020 | 36 |

| | | | | |
|-----|--|-------------------------------|------------|----|
| | NEPAL | | | |
| 13. | Oli calls all-party meeting to discuss contemporary national political issues | The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu | 7-12-2020 | 38 |
| 14. | Council should be held above partisan interests, analysts say By Binod Ghimire | The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu | 13-12-2020 | 39 |
| | SRI LANKA | | | |
| 15. | People have realised UNP's value now - - - - Ruwan | Daily News, Colombo | 7-12-2020 | 40 |
| 16. | SJB will not join with Muslim, Tamil parties for elections – MP Kiriella | Daily News, Colombo | 14-12-2020 | 40 |
| 17. | People disappointed with Govt - Ruwan | Daily News, Colombo | 15-12-2020 | 41 |
| | PAKISTAN | | | |
| 18. | PM orders swift work on GB's provisional provincial status | Daily Times, Islamabad | 3-12-2020 | 41 |
| 19. | Opposition lawmakers to hand in resignations to party heads by 31st By Asim Yasin and Muhammad Anis | The News, Islamabad | 9-12-2020 | 42 |
| 20. | Parliament right forum if dialogue desired: PM Imran Khan - Geo News report | The News, Islamabad | 10-12-2020 | 43 |

THE KASHMIR TIMES, JAMMU 3-12-2020

CRISIS OF LEADERS IN RAHUL CAMP

Rahul Gandhi (50), who is to be re-anointed as the Congress President, faces a serious crisis of shortage of capable leaders in his camp whom he can position in his team after the organisational elections in January or February.

He has to first find the replacement of his hand-picked K C Venugopal (57) as the General Secretary, in-charge of organisation, in the wake of almost all senior leaders wanting him removed from the post from the way his staff blocks their urgent meetings with him and he rarely meets the party workers wanting to discuss the organisational matters with him. Though hailing from Kerala, he is now a Rajya Sabha member from Rajasthan.

Even as a hunt has begun for his successor, Randeep Singh Surjewala (53), AICC general secretary, in-charge of the media department and a former Haryana MLA, has pitched himself for the post, pointing out that Venugopal failed since he can't converse with the party workers in Hindi from north India. He is staking claim as the most suitable candidate, citing his fluency in both Hindi and English and his reach to the party workers.

Two others, who have thrown their names in the ring, are Congress general secretaries Ajay Maken (56), a former union minister from Delhi, and another general secretary Jitendra Singh (49) hailing from the royal family of Alwar in Rajasthan and held the posts of the union minister of state for defence, home and youth affairs & sports. Singh got the party post in the last reshuffle because of his closeness to Rahul.

There should be no surprise if Rahul gives the organisation's responsibility to his old pal Sachin Pilot (43) who fell out with Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot (69) and lost the position as the deputy CM and State Congress president. If the senior party leaders' voice is considered, they will prefer Gehlot for the post any day then Pilot.

Surjewala was made a general secretary in the last reshuffle to relieve him of the media department, but the party could not find anybody suitable for the post. The idea of making one of the spokespersons in-charge was dropped since they were too junior with little experience in the party and ultimately a decision was taken to continue Surjewala as there was no other alternative.

The most suitable was senior spokesman Abhishek Manu Singhvi (61), but he declined to take the responsibility involving 24x7 work which he cannot afford because of the lot of time consumed as one of the senior advocates with a roaring practice.

Two others, who could have shouldered the media responsibility, were automatically out since they became

suspects in the eyes of the Gandhis after they became part of a ginger group of 23 leaders writing to Sonia Gandhi on the sorry state of the party. They are: Anand Sharma (67), a former union minister and currently the deputy leader of Congress in the Rajya Sabha, and former Information and Broadcasting Minister Manish Tewari (54), who is a Lok Sabha member for the second term. Both are quite vocal, a reason why the Gandhis did not want them to occupy a position giving an advantage of daily interaction with the media since they are capable of speaking out their mind any time.

Another former union minister and current Rajya Sabha member Jairam Ramesh (66) was considered and dropped because of his habit of airing the independent views that may embarrass the party. That is how Surjewala holds the dual positions as the media department's in-charge and AICC general secretary in-charge of Karnataka.

A central election authority headed by Rajya Sabha member Madhusudan Mistry (75) is to meet next week to finalise the list of the AICC delegates who elect the party president. It may approach the Congress Working Committee (CWC) thereafter to approve the process for election of the president and then go ahead with an AICC plenary session in January or February.

A divide in the party that temporarily stopped in the wake of the sudden death of veteran leader Ahmed Patel may resurface if the Gandhis try to avoid the elections of the CWC members not held for almost two decades despite the party constitution requiring 12 of the 23 CWC members elected by the AICC delegates and the remaining nominated by the president. The senior Congress leaders are insisting on the CWC elections to democratise the party and they may revolt if these elections are circumvented with any excuse.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 15-12-2020

Decimation of parliamentary democracy is complete: Congress slams government over no winter session of Parliament

Slamming the government for its decision to not hold Parliament's winter session in view of COVID-19, the Congress on Tuesday said the "decimation of parliamentary democracy is complete" and asked if election campaigning could be done amid the pandemic then why can't the session be held.

Senior Congress leader and the party's chief whip in Rajya Sabha Jairam Ramesh also said that the Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, Ghulam Nabi Azad, was not consulted on the matter.

In a letter to leader of Congress in Lok Sabha Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi

said, "Winter months are very crucial for managing the pandemic because of recent spurt in cases during this period, particularly in Delhi. At present, we are in the middle of December and a COVID vaccine is expected very soon."

The minister said he had informally contacted floor leaders of various political parties and "they have expressed their concerns about the ongoing pandemic and opined of doing away with winter session".

Responding to the minister's remarks, Ramesh tweeted, "The Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha was not consulted. Mr. Pralhad Joshi is as usual departing from the truth."

Hitting out at the government, Congress' chief spokesperson Randeep Surjewala said on Twitter, "Modi ji, decimation of 'parliamentary democracy' is complete. NEET/JEE exams can be held during COVID. Schools can be opened, universities can hold exams. Rallies can be held in Bihar-Bengal. But winter session of Parliament can't be held."

"Any semblance of democracy left?" he asked.

On its official Twitter handle, the Congress said, "Another step in the BJP's attempt to destroy democracy."

"The BJP brought crisis on democracy is not limited to parliamentary sessions, but is a crisis on every common person's life, their independence, their wishes. We will fight this crisis," the party said in a tweet in Hindi.

Congress spokesperson Jaiveer Shergill said, "Bihar election – not postponed. New Parliament building ceremony – not postponed. BJP Bengal rallies – not postponed. But Parliament winter session – postponed due to COVID-19.

"Winter session postponement is BJP's expected sinister strategy to avoid debate, questions on farmers' protest."

Another Congress spokesperson Shama Mohamed also hit out at the BJP for going ahead with poll campaigning amid the pandemic, but citing COVID-19 to not hold the winter session of Parliament.

"If COVID-19 hasn't stopped the BJP government from campaigning for elections or even going ahead with a new Parliament building, why should winter session of Parliament be scrapped because of it? BJP is using the pandemic as an excuse to undermine essential democratic processes!" she tweeted.

Senior Congress leader and former Maharashtra Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan said the Inter-Parliamentary Union data shows more than 105 countries across the world held multiple Parliamentary sessions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

He asked why the Modi government was evading the accountability by cancelling the Parliament session.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 5-12-2020

First Bihar, now Hyderabad: A new political blueprint featuring BJP and AIMIM to disarm regional satraps?

Vibha Sharma

The ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) may have emerged as the single-largest party in the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) polls but it is the BJP which stole the show as the runner-up in the closely-contested local bodies' elections.

And while the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) trailed the BJP, it emerged the kingmaker giving a reason to observers to sense a new political blueprint featuring BJP and AIMIM for Muslim-dominated regions to disarm regional satraps.

The BJP election machine managed to turn the local bodies' election into a national event replete with saffron verbosity and star campaigners, including Home Minister Amit Shah, UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, BJP president JP Nadda and BYJM president Tejasvi Surya, leading from the front in true BJP style with offers ranging from changing the name of Hyderabad to 'Bhagyanagar' to 'emancipating' people from 'Nawabi rule'.

Notably, Asaduddin Owaisi's AIMIM won an unprecedented five seats in Bihar's Seemanchal region in recently concluded assembly elections, becoming one of the reasons behind the RJD-led alliance suffering losses and the JD-U-BJP alliance forming the government.

In Hyderabad while AIMIM held to its own, BJP's gains came from TRS, say the observers wondering if the saffron party could have managed it so well without AIMIM presenting the opposite pole in the highly-polarised GHMC polls

First Dubakka and now GHMC (which covers as many as 24 assembly constituencies) has given the BJP a big boost in Telangana and neighbouring Andhra Pradesh where the party fared rather poorly in the last elections.

THE HINDU, DELHI 5-12-2020

'Wont yield to blackmail by BJP's friends during polls', says Mamata Banerjee

Shiv Sahay Singh

IMamata Banerjee holds public meeting on Suvendu's turf

At a time when speculations are rife over the falling out of Trinammol Congress leader Suvendu Adhikari with the party, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on

Monday held a public meeting at Mr. Adhikar's turf and gave a clear message that she will not yield to "blackmailing and bargaining" before polls.

"The BJP and friends of BJP are trying various tricks. I want to tell them you cannot blackmail the TMC, you cannot bargain with TMC whenever elections approaches," Ms Banerjee said addressing the gathering at Purba Medinipur district.

The Chief Minister did not make any direct reference to Mr. Adhikari but her remarks were clearly aimed at TMC heavyweight, who was in Kolkata when she was addressing the rally. Ms. Banerjee's rally at Purba Medinipur was also a show of strength and the entire district was flooded with posters and placards of the Chief Minister.

No member of the Adhikari family, including his father Sisir Adhikari and brother Dibyendu Adhikari were present at Ms. Banerjee's rally. Both of them are MPs are from Purba Medinipur district. Of the 12 TMC MLAs from the district seven of them were present at the rally.

Ms. Banerjee said when she started the party many would take a swipe saying that it won't last long but now the party has turned into a huge tree. Another senior TMC leader and Rajya Sabha Manas Ranjan Bhuniya referred to the famous analogy of Mir Zafar and Siraj-ud-Daulah during the Battle of Plassey but he also refrained from taking any names.

The Chief Minister said she was in full support of the farmer's agitation in Delhi. "The BJP government should either withdraw these farm bills or resign," she said. Ms Banerjee directed her party to hold protests in every block on Tuesday to support the nationwide strike called by farmers and supported by political parties in Opposition.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 13-12-2020

BJP remained busy trying to topple Maharashtra govt: CM Thackeray

On the eve of the winter session of Maharashtra legislature, Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray on Sunday attacked the BJP for accusing his government of "non-performance", saying the Opposition party was "so busy" trying to "topple" his government that it failed to notice various welfare measures being undertaken.

Addressing a press conference, Thackeray hit out at Leader of Opposition in the state assembly Devendra Fadnavis for his remarks of "an undeclared Emergency" in the state.

"If there is an undeclared Emergency in Maharashtra, then is there a declared Emergency in the rest of the country given the manner in which the protesting farmers are being targeted on the outskirts of Delhi?" Thackeray asked.

He questioned whether "pouring water on farmers (use of water cannons) in biting cold is a sign of harmony?"

Without taking names, the CM, who also heads Shiv Sena, criticised the attempts to "discredit" the protests by farmers.

"The BJP should decide whether protesters have support from Pakistan, China or Maoists. You bring sugar and onions from Pakistan. Now farmers are also coming from Pakistan," he said sarcastically.

Union minister Piyush Goyal on Saturday said the agitation no longer remains a farmers' movement as it has been "infiltrated by Leftist and Maoist elements" demanding the release of those put behind bars for "anti-national activities".

This was clearly to derail agriculture reforms brought by the government, he said.

Another BJP leader and Union minister Raosaheb Danve, who hails from Maharashtra, recently stirred a controversy with his remarks that China and Pakistan were behind the protests being staged by cultivators, inviting sharp reactions from various quarters.

"If Fadnavis says the state government taking action against its critics is causing undeclared emergency then labelling farmers who are fighting for their rights as anti-nationals is worse than Emergency," Thackeray said.

He said those who dub 'annadatas' (farmers) terrorists are not entitled to be called humans.

"The BJP has been so busy trying to destabilise the state government that it had no time to go through the work done by us in the last one year. There is no disillusionment among people about the MVA (Maha Vikas Aghadi) government," he said.

Addressing a press conference earlier in the day, Fadnavis accused the government of imposing an "undeclared Emergency" and criticised the Uddhav Thackeray-led regime for "going after" Republic TV's Editor-in-Chief Arnab Goswami and Bollywood actress Kanagana Ranaut.

Deputy Chief Minister and NCP leader Ajit Pawar said Fadnavis looked "demoralised" while addressing the presser.

"The MVA won the recently-held Legislative Council polls held for Graduates and Teachers constituencies, which is a proof that people are satisfied with the government's performance. In these polls, the BJP even lost the Nagpur Graduates seat which it never lost in the last five decades," he said.

Pawar said the names sent to state Governor B S Koshiyari for nomination on 12 Legislative Council seats through the governor's quota be filled in a specific timeframe.

“We agree to the governor’s discretion and powers but there should be a timeframe for filling these seats,” the deputy CM said when asked about the pending approval of the governor.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 14-12-2020

Left watches closely as BJP, Trinamool fight it out for political space in West Bengal

Ravi S Singh

The leaders of the Left parties have been closely watching the face-off between the Centre and the TMC-ruled West Bengal following an attack on BJP president JP Nadda's convoy in view of the forthcoming Assembly elections in the state.

The trigger of the latest confrontation between the Centre and the West Bengal government was the security lapse while Nadda, also a Rajya Sabha MP, was en route to Diamond Harbour, which is represented by Abhishek Banerjee, the nephew of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

A large crowd attacked the moving convoy with brick-bats and lathis and hurled empty glass bottles at the vehicles in the presence of state police personnel.

The Centre has taken a strong view regarding the attack on Nadda's convoy and on BJP leaders accompanying him, especially with the state government's defiance to its concerns in the matter.

"The steps being taken by the Centre raise apprehension about its move towards the state government," a top Left leader said.

The apprehension in some Left quarters is that the Centre could, among other steps, impose President's Rule or advance the Assembly elections in the state.

The Centre has asked the state to release for central deputation three officers who were drafted for Nadda's security, a move opposed by the Banerjee regime.

The Left parties see the tussle between the BJP and the TMC as a development which will further polarise the political space between the two.

This will make it yet more difficult for them in the context of the Assembly elections, due in Apr-May next year.

Another Left leader said that the delay on the Congress' part to give practical shape to its intent of allying with the Left front for the Assembly election has not helped the matter.

On the other hand, the TMC and the BJP have started their campaign in the right earnest.

"Political discussions in West Bengal during the past few days are centred only around the TMC and the BJP," a Left leader hailing from the state observed.

The BJP, which emerged as principal challenger to the TMC after bagging 18 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in the state in the 2019 General Election, has added aggression to its campaign.

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat will be visiting the state. Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who had recently gone there, is expected to be there again next week.

INDIA TODAY, NEW DELHI 14-12-2020

After Dubbaka victory, BJP now gears up for Tirupati parliamentary bypolls

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has decided to focus on the Telugu states — Andhra Pradesh and Telangana ahead of the polls there. After securing stunning victories in Dubbaka assembly bypolls and Greater Hyderabad municipal elections in Telangana, the BJP is now chalking out strategies to win Tirupati parliamentary bypolls.

The saffron party held a mega meeting of its state unit leaders, and discussed strategies for the bypolls. "GHMC and Dubbaka victories show the mood of southern India people, and their love towards Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Saffron wave will soon be visible in Andhra Pradesh," party's national secretary and state in-charge Sunil Deodhar told India Today.

The Tirupati parliament bypolls, likely to be announced shortly, will be more of a litmus test for the saffron party's "dakshin plan", and to ensure victory in Tirupati parliamentary bypolls, the party has constituted 45 booth-level committees for each division. The party has also been chanting a slogan: "To save Tirumala, BJP has to win in Tirupati."

BJP leader GVL Narasimha Rao said, "This election is against the corrupt practice of both the ruling YSRCP and the earlier TDP government." While the saffron party is yet to announce its candidates, the TDP and the YSRCP have named the candidates for the upcoming bypolls. The BJP and actor-turned-politician Pawan Kalyan from the Jana Sena party may contest the election jointly.

Tirupati parliamentary constituency has three assembly segments from Chittoor, and four segments from Nellore. It also shares a border with Tamil Nadu. The BJP had won Tirupati in 1999, and in 2014 it ranked second after the YSRCP.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 5-12-2020

Abdullah Faces Criticism for Incomplete Reconciliation Council

KABUL - Analysts on Monday criticized Abdullah Abdullah, head of the High Council for National Reconciliation, for the delay in making the council fully staffed and functional, saying that Abdullah is spending his time on foreign trips rather than focusing on filling the posts of the council's membership.

The analysts said that Abdullah should first establish a national consensus on the peace process and then opt for international trips to boost regional consensus on Afghan peace.

Abdullah traveled to Pakistan, India, Iran, Uzbekistan and Turkey in the last two months to attract more regional support to the Afghan peace process.

“Dr Abdullah’s trips are important at a regional level, but it was more important that he establish the Reconciliation Council first. The council should have presented strategy and policy,” said Faizullah Jalal, a university lecturer.

“Mr. Abdullah had some achievements on his trips, but he should have expedited the activity of the council,” said Malalai Shinwari, former MP.

The High Council for National Reconciliation said the formation of the leadership of the council with 46 members will be announced in the near future.

But some politicians--who, according to sources, are not part of the council--said they have not been consulted about this matter.

“Our name was removed due to the critical views we held. Now we are hearing once again that our name is included, but, so far, we have not received any official notice,” said Rahmatullah Nabil, former head of the National Directorate of Security.

“The concern of the Hizb-e-Islami leadership is that the High Council for National Reconciliation might make a political bargain in the appointment of its members, instead of keeping an open discussion,” said Hafiz-Ur-Rahman Naqi, member of Hizb-e-Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

In August, President Ghani in a decree announced 45 politicians as members of the leadership of the High Council for National Reconciliation, but the decision was rejected by Abdullah, who said he has the authority to appoint members of the council, not the president.

“Mr. Abdullah might not have the ability take on this responsibility,” said Hamza Nuristani, an analyst, referring to the appointment of the council leadership.

“Afghans will face more hardships if they don’t end disputes,” said Noor Ahmad Nasiri, political affairs analyst.

This comes as the EU, the UK and US embassy in Kabul called for “urgent establishment” and "operationalization" of the Reconciliation Council.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 5-12-2020

High Council for National Reconciliation holds first maiden meeting

KABUL: A number of Afghan leaders and influential figures including former President Hamid Karzai, Jihadi leaders, speakers of parliament’s two Houses (Wolesi Jirga, and Meshrano Jirga) attended the first meeting of the leadership committee of High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), where they stressed the need for the urgent end to the hostility as well as consensus among political leaders to move the peace efforts toward.

The HCNR held its maiden meeting at the Presidential Palace on Saturday in the wake of strong pushes from different quarters regarding the complete formation and operation of the body.

Addressing the meeting, President Ashraf Ghani said that Taliban are the reality and the Afghan politicians, and the government of Afghanistan and society accept them as a veracity of the society.

“The time has gone to reject or deny you,” President Ghani said in his clear message to the Taliban, a group the Afghan government is seeking peace with. He called on the Taliban to also accept the current reality of Afghan society.

“You won’t surrender nor do we, war doesn’t have a winner and its continuation is an easy task, but the main courage is to work for peace and its winner is the nation of Afghanistan,” President Ghani added.

They (Taliban) should think that the last six generations suffered the brunt of war and we all should come together to heal wounds of the six generations and this is the responsibility of all not only the responsibility of the government and nation of Afghanistan, he added.

The Afghan nation has consensus on peace, according to President Ghani. “If the Taliban continue to take their lives through violence, or threaten and insult them on a daily basis, then such consensus will diminish.”

The Taliban must realize that they lose nothing if node for a ceasefire. “The Afghan government and the nation promise to negotiate seriously with you (Taliban), so don’t fear a ceasefire.”

The ball is now on the Taliban ground to make a decision. “My wish from the Taliban is to show political will in order

to go from symbolic rhetoric toward main agendas in the second round of the talks.”

Progress has been made in the talks, but it is important to take advantage from the current opportunity, the president added.

Former President, Hamid Karzai has called the meeting of the Leadership Committee of HCNR a very important step toward. “Out of official structure, I will spare no efforts to help and cooperate with the council in the aspect of the peace process,” the former President promised.

According to him, peace is a dream for all the Afghans. “We, the Afghans have suffered a lot during the war; therefore, we will strive hard to reach our noble cause for peace.”

“Indeed, efforts will translate into results when we all work with unity and rising voices from a strong and brotherly-hood position.”

We and the Taliban are from this soil, ex-President said, adding “it’s our duty to end the Afghan killings and get control of our affairs.”

Alliance and unity is the only way that leads us to success, he mentioned.

Pointing to the leadership meeting, the ex-president said that this council needs to be more inclusive and other prominent figures should also be involved.

He appreciated both the negotiating teams (Afghan and Taliban) for reaching primary agreement on the producers. Without Taliban’s cooperation, such progress would have not been possible.

Former President said it is time to expand hands to each other and work toward peace for a peaceful and independent Afghanistan to enjoy good relations with the world and the neighboring countries.

Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the Chairman of HCNR at the inaugural meeting of the Leadership Committee of HCNR said that this committee represents all segments of the society and reflects the diversity of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

He said that the guideline of the HCNR in its efforts to achieve peace is the national interest of the country. We will decide after consultation and fully accommodating the rightful demands of the people of Afghanistan.

He said that peace needs unity, consensus, and inclusivity in words and in action. Peace needs sacrifices, and we are ready to fully engage with the Taliban to discuss all issues.

From now on, the regular meetings of the leadership committee will take place to discuss the peace process. The first demand of the people of Afghanistan is reduction of violence and a permanent ceasefire, he added.

“We have to agree on how to preserve the achievements of the past, and at the same time move forward and have a political settlement. There might be a time that requires the decision of the people of Afghanistan, at that point we shall decide collectively on how to consult the people.”

He said that the people of Afghanistan demand peace, and an end to war, violence and bloodshed. We have to end the war, and open a new peaceful chapter in our country. I do not have any personal agenda in seeking peace. “My aim is a permanent peace in Afghanistan.”

He said that today all Afghans demand is a nationwide ceasefire. As war and its continuation took sacrifices from the people and there is no doubt that they are concerned and their concern is serious.

“Afghan people are the possessor of the peace process and we will try as representatives of different segments to consider their main demands in the process,” he asserted.

Political willingness existed to end war, thus asking all people including those who are living in the area under control of Taliban to play a key role in the process.

We are committed to a just, lasting, and inclusive peace in Afghanistan. “We have the political will, and the support of the people to do so. However, peace doesn’t mean a return to the past. We are seeking a peace that offers a dignified future for everyone, he mentioned.”

He said, “we are calling for a permanent ceasefire. War destroys the country, and everyone, but peace will guarantee a future for everyone. Releasing the Taliban prisoners was a bold step. It demonstrates that the people of Afghanistan are ready for sacrifice if needed.”

Afghanistan to achieve an enduring peace requires international and regional support. “I thank the US, EU, NATO, Islamic countries, IOC, regional countries, and the state of Qatar for supporting the peace process, Afghanistan and hosting the peace talks.”

He thanked the Republic’s negotiation team for their tireless efforts, and representing the republic. “I also thank the Taliban negotiation team for their cooperation. I assure the republic’s negotiation team that they enjoy the full support of the people of Afghanistan, and the HCNR.”

Prominent Jihadi Leader, Ustad Abdul Rab Rasoul Sayaf said that peace is a need and it’s our responsibility than anyone else, including the Taliban group, to bring peace to the nation.

“We must hold efforts to bring a dignified and durable peace, a peace to keep unity among our people in the country,” he added.

While announcing his cooperation in the peace process, he said that besides bringing peace, efforts must be made in terms of standing on our own feet.

He highly praised the Afghan security forces for giving sacrifices in the country.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 6-12-2020

Ceasefire Will be on Agenda in Talks: Taliban Spokesman

DOHA - Amid a breakthrough in Doha talks, Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem on Friday said ceasefire will be on the agenda among other topics in the negotiations.

He said in a tweet that the agenda will be made in agreement of both sides.

“A ceasefire upon which the Afghan government insists and the establishment of an Islamic system that the Taliban urge could be there (at the talks),” said Sayed Akbar Agha, a former Taliban commander.

This comes a day after the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said that he is heading back to the region to gather international support for the Afghan peace negotiations.

In the first leg of his trip, the US envoy landed in Ankara where he met senior Turkish officials on the current developments in the Afghan peace talks.

“The modality of the participation of the Taliban in the structure of Afghanistan’s power structure will be transferred to the next US administration,” said Shukria Barikzai, a former diplomat.

“The talks will enter a new phase very soon. Considering the demand of Afghan people for a calm, our priority is to reach a comprehensive ceasefire,” said Ghulam Farooq Majroh, a member of the republic’s peace negotiating team in Doha.

“We are in support of peace and ceasefire. We want an end to the war,” said Ghezal, a resident in Kabul.

Despite calls for a ceasefire inside and outside the country, violence continues to grip Afghans across Afghanistan.

In the latest incident of violence, at least three members of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) were killed and 19 civilians were wounded in a blast that targeted a security patrol in Gardez city.

“Reports by our intelligence agencies indicate that it was a remote-controlled car bomb that was detonated on a market,” said Mohammad Halim Fedae, the governor of Paktia.

The Afghan government has accused the Taliban of killing 134 civilians and wounding 342 more over the past one month. But the Taliban has hit out over the allegations, saying the Afghan government forces have killed 68 civilians just in the past one week.

The breakthrough reached in Doha between the two sides was greeted positively in Afghanistan and within the international community.

The peace negotiations between teams from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban started on September 12; however, talks had been delayed because of disagreements over procedural rules.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 9-12-2020

Afghan Parliament to Shift to Electronic Voting, Attendance System

KABUL, Afghanistan – The Afghan parliament is pushing on efforts to shift from paper to electronic voting, including electronic attendance system for the members, said the Wolesi Jirga Secretariat on Monday.

The move came days after the Wolesi Jirga voted for at least 16 nominee ministers and directorates, where roughly all the 248 lawmakers were present; but on the following day only 10 MPs attended the assembly.

“The voting system in the Wolesi Jirga will shift to electronic in the next few days as the technical department of the Wolesi Jirga has completed the project by 90 percent,” said Hujjatullah Kheradmand, the deputy head of the parliament secretariat, as TOLONews quoted.

While officials bid to break through the traditional approach, believing technological medium are more reliable, critique suggests why such an initiative has not been implemented long ago.

Habib-Ur-Rahman Pedram, an MP from Herat, said he is sure the electronic voting system will “prevent corruption,” where a number of MPs have been accused of fraud.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 12-12-2020

MPs Criticize Govt’s Development Office for Ignoring Parliament

KABUL - Lawmakers in the Wolesi Jirga, Afghanistan’s lower house of parliament, on Thursday blasted the Operation and Support Office of the President for National Development for not providing information regarding its budget and financial transactions to the lawmakers in the parliament.

The proposed budgetary allocation for the office is 13 billion Afs.

MPs said that the OSOPND was seen giving the development projects to certain companies without undertaking a proper bidding process. But OSOPND responded that it is ready to answer the MPs.

“The projects that are carried out by the Operation and Support Office of the President for National Development are mostly carried out from a single source and other companies are not allowed to participate,” said Irfanullah Irfan, an MP.

“The accounts of sectoral ministries are zero, but the Operation and Support Office of the President for National Development has 80 percent of the development budget” said Zabiullah Atiq, MP.

“It is better that the Operation and Support Office of the President for National Development disclose its spending and clarify where it spends the money. There is a need for transparency in the spending,” said Maiwand Rouhani, an anti-corruption analyst.

Lawmakers argue that the work of the Operation and Support Office of the President for National Development is duplicating the work of other government entities such as the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing.

MPs suggested that the Operation and Support Office of the President for National Development shouldn't be a separate budgetary unit as it is not responsive about its businesses and works.

But officials from the Operation and Support Office of the President for National Development stated that it has spent 10 billion from the 13 billion Afs during the current fiscal year.

“In 1399 (2020) 13 billion Afs were allocated for the Operation and Support Office of the President for National Development to cover numerous projects,” said Tafseer Siahposh, a spokesman for the Operation and Support Office of the President for National Development.

The Operation and Support Office of the President for National Development has worked on a number of projects including the construction of Darul Aman Administrative Complex, Darul Aman Palace, Machalgho Dam, construction of 100 mosques, projects at Pul-e-Charkhi jail, projects at Hamid Karzai International Airports, construction of hostels in 10 provinces and hundreds of other projects.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 4-12-2020

Attacking the system one step at a time

Anil Giri

Civil liberty is something the KP Sharma Oli administration has never given two hoots about. It was evident from its initial decisions not to allow protests in the Maitighar area.

In the subsequent months, the Oli administration tried to introduce various laws that were largely aimed at curtailing

freedom of expression and press freedom and shrinking civic space. It was only after protests and objections that it stepped back.

The difference between the Oli administration and the governments in the past is it was the first one to have a clear electorate mandate to govern for the full term in about two and a half decades.

People frustrated with frequent government changes every nine months on an average had breathed a sigh of relief when Oli returned to power in February 2018 with a nearly two-thirds majority in Parliament.

But the Oli administration not only squandered a golden opportunity to ensure good governance and strengthen the system guaranteed by the constitution but also started to take the country down the regressive path, observers say.

“It seems Oli is least bothered about protecting this constitution, federalism, inclusiveness, secularism,” said Puranjan Acharya, a political commentator. “These are our hard-earned achievements.”

Since its restoration in 1990, Nepal's democracy has been on quite a bumpy road. The fledgling democracy was nipped in about 15 years when then king Gyanendra assumed absolute power in 2005. An armed outfit led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the current chair of the ruling Nepal Communist Party, declared a war against the state in 1996 demanding socio-political transformation, which included abolishing the monarchy and getting rid of the multiparty parliamentary system that the country was practising. Maoist leaders who before the war were in parliament representing a party called Janamorcha Nepal had even described parliament as “a place where dog meat is sold by showing a goat's head”.

The Maoist war continued for 10 years.

Gyanendra's putsch in 2005 prompted Nepal's political parties to unite. The Maoists who laid down their weapons in 2006 joined the force.

The historic people's movement forced Gyanendra to capitulate.

In 2008, the country abolished the 240-year-old monarchy. After wrangling for seven years, political parties in September 2015 promulgated a new constitution, prompted by massive earthquakes that killed nearly 9,000 people, amid objections from various sections of the society.

Oli for the first time had been to Baluwatar in October that year, with the support of Dahal's Maoist party, and remained there for 10 months.

Oli made a comeback in 2018 with a resounding victory.

A strong and stable government, analysts say, was expected to strengthen the system, root out corruption, empower

institutions and enable sub-national governments. But it looks like the country is going in the opposite direction, according to them.

Journalist Chandra Kishore, a columnist for the Post's sister paper Kantipur, has been keenly watching the developments over the past years—since the promulgation of the constitution in 2015 and elections in 2017.

“I sometimes wonder if there is democracy at the grassroots,” Chandra Kishore told the Post. “After electing provincial and local governments, the federal government in Kathmandu has never bothered to devolve power. Democracy flourishes when it's inclusive and when it starts from the grassroots.”

Even after being installed about three years ago, the federal government has yet to introduce several laws so as to empower the sub-national governments and make them work independently.

“A strong federal government with such a huge mandate to strengthen the system actually has carried out a coup by stifling the sub-national governments,” said Chandra Kishore.

Prime Minister Oli himself has not hesitated to make some statements over the years, which observers say blatantly go against the system the country has adopted through the constitution.

In May last year, Oli said that provincial and local governments are not separate entities, but units under the federal government.

“Nepal is one nation, one country and has one government—Nepal government. It has different subordinate agencies—seven provincial and 253 local governments,” Oli said, warning the other two tiers of government not to take “unnecessary steps”.

In May this year, during a discussion on the government's policies and programmes at Parliament, Oli said that provincial and local governments “are not autonomous entities” and that they, instead, are under the federal government.

In October, Oli told Karnali chief minister and other leaders of the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) that provinces are administrative units under the federal government.

Article 56 (1) of the constitution says: “The main structure of the federal democratic republic of Nepal shall be of three levels, namely the federation, the state and the local level.”

Article 56 (2) states that the federation, state and local levels shall exercise the power of the state of Nepal pursuant to this constitution and law.

Not only observers, party insiders too say Oli has repeatedly displayed his uncanny authoritative streak. The current crisis

in the ruling party is also because of Oli's opponents alleging that he has been running the party and the government in a “unilateral way” bypassing the consultative process, which is a must if democratic norms were to be followed, according to party insiders.

Ram Karki, a lawmaker from the ruling party, says neither his party nor the government has been able to internalise that the changes that the country has brought about are meant for the people and not for a handful of leaders.

“Political parties are known as agents of change that can make a difference in the lives of people by upholding their rights and ensuring service delivery to them,” said Karki. “Taking people along is democracy; when people are kept out, democracy is doomed.”

The Oli administration over the past two and a half years has been facing the charges that no democratically elected government would like to—corruption, contempt for the media, efforts to shrink civic space and centralisation of power.

What is concerning is, observers say, if the new wave of the world is seeing—that democratically elected governments are bent on destroying democracy—is finding a refuge in Nepal under the Oli administration.

In their book “How Democracies Die”, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, professors of government at Harvard University, have described how democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box.

“Since the end of the Cold War, most democratic breakdowns have been caused not by generals and soldiers but by elected governments themselves. Like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, elected leaders have subverted democratic institutions in Georgia, Hungary, Nicaragua, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Sri Lanka, Turkey and Ukraine,” they write.

In Nepal, it will be too far-fetched to think about the death of democracy, observers say. But they drop a caveat that if a government begins to think that the electoral mandate given to it means a carte blanche to do whatever it wants and if the opposition fails to play its role to hold the government to account, these are dangerous signs for democracy.

The Nepali Congress' utter failure to perform the role of the opposition has over the past years emboldened the Oli government.

Amid rising frustrations among the people, in recent days, pro-monarchy and pro-Hindu forces have started to take to the streets demanding the scrapping of the federal system. Earlier this week, these forces marched on Kathmandu streets. The protests were held unhindered even as gatherings, rallies and demonstrations have not been allowed in the wake of the rising number of coronavirus cases.

On Thursday, Nepali Congress senior leader Ram Chandra Poudel was detained for three hours in Tanahun “for violating prohibitory orders,” much to the opposition party’s chagrin.

“Oli appears to be bent on destroying the system,” said Shekhar Koirala, a Congress leader. His actions are posing a serious threat to democracy. While pro-monarchy forces are freely holding rallies, one of our senior leaders was taken into custody, which just makes a mockery of democratic values.”

The Oli administration’s selective dealings when it comes to rallies were seen in the past too. When a youth-led campaign was holding peaceful demonstrations against corruption and demanding polymerase chain reaction tests for all, the Oli administration was swift to use force. But on the heels of those demonstrations, Oli’s supporters carried out rallies in favour of the government, without facing any objection from security forces.

Observers and political party leaders say the Oli administration is trying to destroy the democratic system one step at a time. Making parliament non-functional, weakening constitutional bodies and institutions by keeping them vacant and making the Office of the President work in favour of his government are some of the examples, they say.

After facing a serious crisis in the party, Oli suddenly prorogued Parliament on July 2. Since then laws are being promulgated through ordinances.

Dahal, Oli’s bete noire in the party, has also accused Oli of making attempts to dissolve the House, something which is not provisioned in the constitution. Dahal, though he tried to clarify later, has also accused Oli of trying to influence the judiciary.

Many say the Oli administration has been trampling on a key component of democracy—separation of powers—by trying to erase the distinct lines between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary.

“Oli is systematically attacking the system, posing a serious threat to democracy and federalism,” Koirala told the Post.

Observers, however, say though Oli as prime minister and the leader of the largest party deserves more blame, the main opposition is equally responsible.

“The role of the opposition is to keep the government in check. It should continuously remind the government of its wrongdoings,” said Acharya, the political commentator.

“Can you imagine Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba playing the role of the opposition? The Oli administration is failing but so is the Congress party. Pro-royalist forces are on the streets but have you seen the Congress? Its presence is neither in Parliament nor on the streets.”

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 7-12-2020

Oli calls all-party meeting to discuss contemporary national political issues

Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli has called an all-party meeting.

According to Surya Thapa, Oli’s press advisor, the meeting will be held at 11am on Tuesday at Baluwatar.

“Prime Minister Oli has called an all-party meeting with political parties represented in Parliament to hold discussions on contemporary national political issues,” Thapa informed via Twitter.

Earlier in May also Oli had called a similar all-party meeting to discuss issues including amendment to the constitution and the government’s response to Covid-19.

The meeting followed the government move of registering a constitution amendment proposal in Parliament to amend Schedule 3 of the constitution to update the political map of Nepal in the national emblem.

Before that, in November last year too Oli had held an all-party meeting on the heels of publication of the new political map of India by the Indian government placing the Kalapani area within its borders.

Nepal had objected to India’s move of depicting the area within Indian borders, saying Kalapani belongs to Nepal.

Tuesday’s all-party meeting has been called at a time when pro-monarchy, pro-Hindu forces are organising rallies to demand scrapping of the federal system.

Over the last few weeks, such forces, who have been carrying out rallies in different parts of the country, held similar demonstrations in Kathmandu twice.

Observers say though such protests are not a major threat to Nepal’s federal system and it is too far-fetched to even think that the country can revert to the monarchy and Hindu state, they are of the view that people’s frustrations against the current regime’s failures could have stoked such demonstrations.

The all-party meeting also comes amid rising tensions in Oli’s Nepal Communist Party where his opponent faction led by chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal has upped the ante against him.

Despite Oli’s objection, the Dahal faction has been pushing ahead with party committee meetings, including one of the Standing Committee on Sunday, which Oli did not attend, in an indication that Oli is gradually sliding into the minority.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 13-12-2020

Council should be held above partisan interests, analysts say

Binod Ghimire

Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli on Thursday called a meeting of the Constitutional Council for Sunday after holding several rounds of negotiations with Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba, who is a member of the council as the leader of the main opposition.

The two held a meeting even on Friday to discuss the appointments at a number of constitutional commissions.

But with Deuba announcing on Saturday that he won't be attending the meeting, Sunday's meeting is going to be postponed. The Constitutional Council cannot convene a meeting in the absence of the leader of the main opposition. On top of that, for the meeting to convene, at least four members must be present besides the prime minister, who chairs the council.

Deuba has said he won't attend the meeting because it would give a negative message as it is holding a mass demonstration against the government a day later.

"Participating in Sunday's meeting is not feasible for the party president [Deuba]. He will participate whenever the meeting is called next time," Ramesh Lekhak, a Nepali Congress leader, told the Post.

Analysts, however, say the Congress party's statement that the participation of its chief in the meeting "might send a negative" message itself tells how the Constitutional Council is undermined by the parties.

No meeting of the Constitutional Council has been held since March last year, even as dozens of constitutional positions remain vacant.

Though Oli in October and November last year had called the council's meetings three times, Deuba boycotted them owing to the political wrangling over power-sharing.

Analysts say if not on Sunday, the meeting now will be held anytime soon, as there seems to be some kind of a 'deal' between Oli and Deuba.

"It is clear that the meeting was called after negotiations yielded positive results," Daman Nath Dhungana, former Speaker of the House of Representatives and a civil society leader, told the Post. "Only the party sympathisers have chances to lead the constitutional bodies when appointments are based on political sharing. This is completely against the spirit of the statute."

He said the composition of the council, which has the representation of all the organs of the state in addition to the

leader of the opposition, was designed to ensure that nominations are done fairly.

The six-member council led by the prime minister has the chief justice, the Speaker and the deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, chairman of the National Assembly, and leader of the main opposition as members.

Parliament is yet to elect its deputy Speaker.

Analysts say a decision on appointments as per agreement between Oli and Deuba rather than following the true spirit of the objective of the Constitutional Council will turn it into a rubber stamp.

Dhungana says the constitutional commissions are envisioned to hold the government to account. Therefore, those getting appointed must be capable and have a high level of integrity who follow the constitutional provisions in letter and spirit.

"You cannot expect people handpicked by the prime minister and the leader of the opposition to maintain the dignity of the commissions," he said. "They will only weaken them."

Experts on constitutional affairs say making decisions through the council without electing the deputy Speaker, who also is a member of the council, is not justifiable because the council's decisions are expected to be done unanimously.

Clause 6 of the Constitutional Council Act says each matter in the council's meeting needs to be decided unanimously. A decision on the majority basis can be taken but only from the subsequent meeting after attempts at consensus fails.

Bipin Adhikari, a constitutional lawyer and former dean of Kathmandu University School of Law, said the very provision to make the decision unanimously is breached when the council's meeting is held without the election of the deputy Speaker.

The position of the deputy Speaker, which traditionally goes to the opposition, has been vacant since Shiva Maya Tumbahangphe resigned in January.

"The main opposition would have raised the issue if Oli called the meeting without consensus," Adhikari told the Post. "As Oli and Deuba seem to have a deal, the Congress is not concerned about it."

As many as 45 positions are vacant at 13 constitutional commissions.

While all the five positions including chairperson are vacant in National Human Rights Commission, Women Commission, Dalit Commission, Indigenous Nationalities Commission and Inclusive Commissions, others either don't have chairpersons or members. For instance, three positions including Chief Commissioner are vacant in the

Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority while Election Commission lacks two commissioners.

Senior advocate Chandra Kant Gyawali, who specialises on constitutional law, said commissions cannot perform their constitutional responsibility when their leadership is appointed after negotiations between the executive head and the leader of the main opposition.

“The constitutional commissions too have a role to play in holding the executive to account,” he told the Post. “However, over the years such constitutional commissions haven’t been able to perform their responsibility as appointments are being made on political sharing.”

The experts say Nabin Ghimire, immediate past chief of the constitutional anti-graft body, was criticised for turning a blind eye to the corruption charges against the government and the people close to the executive because he was considered close to the Nepal Communist Party (NCP).

Senior advocate Bhimarjun Acharya, who also specialises on constitutional law, says the people will gradually lose faith in these commissions if proximity to the party and the leaders prevails over capability and competence during the appointment process.

“Those appointed by the grace of Oli or Deuba will be loyal to them, not to the institution,” Acharya told the Post. “The parties have turned the commissions into agencies to dole out appointments to people close to them.”

The experts say never before were so many positions vacant in the constitutional bodies and this gives the council an opportunity to make the recommendations adhering to proportional representation of Nepal’s diverse population.

“This is an opportunity to set an example by ensuring all the communities have proportional representation in constitutional bodies,” said Adhikari. “Ensuring representations is not possible when there are fewer vacancies to fill.”

Article 42 of the constitution makes it mandatory for the government to ensure proportional representation of all communities in the state machinery.

Appointments to the constitutional commissions don’t have proportional representation so far. For instance, among five members of the National Human Rights Commission, except Mohna Ansari, all others belonged to the Brahmin/Chhetri community. The Parliamentary Hearing Committee has often raised the issue. It has decided to summon the prime minister to ask why the constitutional provision of proportional representation is not being followed while recommending candidates.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 7-12-2020

People have realised UNP’s value now - Ruwan

United National Party (UNP) Deputy Leader Ruwan Wijewardena said that the people are now listening to the voice of the Opposition, particularly of the UNP, because the Government failed to fulfill their promises.

He added that even when many members of the UNP left the party and formed their own, many within the UNP remain resolute to protect the UNP and resurrect it.

The Deputy Leader said that the Government is failing on many fronts, and despite coming to power with a 2/3 majority, the Government is yet to make much progress in its one year in power.

“Today the people are looking for an alternative. They are sad because UNP is not in Parliament. The People have realised the need for an alternative voice and that UNP could fill this gap in Parliament,” he said.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 14-12-2020

SJB will not join with Muslim, Tamil parties for elections – MP Kiriella

Kandy District Parliamentarian, Opposition Chief Whip Lakshman Kiriella said that candidates of Muslim and Tamil parties will not be given nominations under the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and that they could work together with the SJB after the election if they wish. He said that the representatives of the Muslim and Tamil political parties who had received nominations under the SJB had betrayed the party during the voting on the passage of the 20th Amendment to the Constitution and that there were legal issues regarding their removal because their being representatives of another party.

He said that Rauff Hakeem and Rishad Bathiudeen were not in a position to oppose the 20th Amendment because they had not been able to do so in their party's political councils.

Kiriella said Muslim and Tamil politicians such as Kabir, Haleem, Mujibur and Marikkar, who are with his party in both good and bad times, would be fielded as their own candidates in the forthcoming elections.

He said that there were many instances where representatives of Muslim and Tamil political parties had entered Parliament through the SJB votes and betrayed the party at crucial times.

Kiriella said that the Muslim and Tamil political parties had been deceiving the major political parties and the people of the country for a long time and that the SJB was no longer ready to be the hostages of those parties.

He added that the party would have won three more seats, had the party fielded Muslim candidates in the Eastern Province without giving a chance to the members who betrayed them.

The MP said that if the 19th Amendment had existed, the Muslims would have been able to find a just solution to the problems they face today, but today the Muslims have been subjected to harassment under the 20th Amendment to the Constitution.

He said that the Muslim politicians who had supported the introduction of a dictatorial constitution that was unfavorable to the country were fabricating a false protest against the cremation of COVID victims.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 15-12-2020

People disappointed with Govt - Ruwan

The Deputy Leader of the United National Party Ruwan Wijewardene stated that the current Government which came into power promising much reform and justice has been rejected by its own supporters within a short time. Wijewardene made these statements when he called on the Chief Incumbent of the Mahiyangana Rajamaha Viharaya Ven. Muruthdeniye Dhammaratana Thera yesterday. He said the UNP Government was accused of selling the country's national resources to the international community, but said that his party had not done so as claimed but the incumbent Government was already in the process of doing the same.

He said steps have been taken to clear 6,000 acres of forest in Mahiyanganaya and Maha Oya areas and hand them over to companies closely associated with ruling members of the Government.

He said that the country was in a state of lawlessness and that the leaders who said that one law would prevail over this country and all of its citizenry are not even acting in the manner that echoes their sentiments. He pointed out that there was a question as to whether there was an independent judiciary in the country and that the cases of the Government's allies had been dropped and the accused had been granted bail, adding that even Pillayan was now free.

He emphasized that the programme carried out by the government during the year was disappointing and that this Government would not govern for much long.

DAILY TIMES, ISLAMABAD 3-12-2020

PM orders swift work on GB's provisional provincial status

Prime Minister Imran Khan has pledged that the federal government will work on fast track basis to grant the provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan in order to address the sense of deprivation of the people of the region.

Addressing the oath-taking ceremony of the new cabinet member of Gilgit-Baltistan on Wednesday, the Prime Minister said that a committee to this effect will be constituted and it will work under a time frame.

The Premier congratulated the cabinet and Chief Minister Khalid Khurshid on assuming a "difficult duty to serve the masses". He expressed confidence that the new government in GB will set new standards of governance that will improve the living standard of the people. "I know your area. I know your problems," he said.

Unveiling his plan for development and welfare of the people of GB, Imran Khan said the present government's Ehsaas Programme, which is the largest poverty alleviation programme of Pakistan history, will be introduced in GB as well.

He said all the people of GB will be provided health insurance with the issuance of Sehat Insaf Cards under which they can get free medical facilities at any hospital up to one million rupees. He said the under-construction 250-bed hospital in Gilgit will be completed.

The Prime Minister expressed commitment to turn Gilgit Baltistan into a hub of tourism. He said that easy loans will be provided to the people to help them construct rooms at their residences for tourists.

He said that 300MW hydro electricity will be generated, which will be more than sufficient for the region. He said that two hydro electricity power stations are being constructed; two others are in the pipeline while two more have been approved. Besides, he said, micro hydro power stations will also be set up. The Prime Minister said that a special economic zone (SEZ) will also be constructed in GB where industries will be relocated.

Elaborating the PTI's vision, Imran Khan said that he is focused to uplift the living standard of the downtrodden segment of the society. He said development of the backward areas, including GB, merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan is a priority of his government.

Commenting on the recent interview of former finance minister Ishaq Dar on BBC News, the Prime Minister said, "If you want to see stress, you should have seen Ishaq Dar's face yesterday," adding that Dar lied in the interview.

Dar, who is also a close relative of ex-prime minister Nawaz Sharif, had revealed during the BBC interview that he owns only one property in Pakistan and that too, has been seized by the government.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 9-12-2020

Opposition lawmakers to hand in resignations to party heads by 31st

Asim Yasin and Muhammad Anis

The opposition parties under the umbrella of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) Tuesday decided to resign en bloc from the assemblies.

Addressing a news conference here after a meeting of the party heads, JUI-F leader and PDM chief Fazlur Rehman said the opposition leadership had decided unanimously that their Members of National and Provincial Assemblies would hand over resignations to their party heads by December 31.

“We will not disappoint the masses who have been participating in our protests with enthusiasm,” said the PDM president flanked by PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, PML-N Vice Chairman Maryam Nawaz and other leaders.

The PDM meeting also decided to go ahead with its plan to hold what they said a decisive public meeting at the Minar-e-Pakistan in Lahore on December 13.

Top leaders of all parties of the PDM participated in the meeting which lasted for over four hours. Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and President Asif Ali Zardari also spoke through video link. Nawaz Sharif stressed tendering resignations from assemblies and Asif Zardari agreed to his proposal.

Fazlur Rehman told a questioner that once the opposition members resign from assemblies, they would not take back their resignation.

“Our members will not take back their resignations like the PTI did in the past,” he said. The PDM president said the steering committee of the movement would meet on Wednesday (today) to decide about the schedule of a "long march" on Islamabad besides deciding about shutdown and wheel-jam strikes.

He said the committee would also chalk out a plan to hold rallies and meetings at the divisional level. PML-N Secretary General Ahsan Iqbal heads the PDM steering committee.

“The legs of the rulers’ chair are already shaken and they just need a push to go,” Fazlur Rehman said. He said the opposition would neither hold negotiations with the rulers nor the PTI would get an NRO.

“The fake prime minister, who seems to be intoxicated today, was speaking in a tone as if he is making an offer of talks to the opposition parties,” he said. He said the PDM leadership had also decided to go ahead with its December 13 public meeting at Minar-e-Pakistan, Lahore.

“They will face the same bitter reaction as they experienced in Multan, if any hurdles are created to the public meeting,” he warned the Punjab government, adding the event would be decisive and prove to be last nail for the government.

Asked whether the PDM leaders were afraid of a crackdown on them, he said they had not even thought of it. Asked to comment on "selectors," he said whether the selectors stood with the government or not, the movement was against the system and rigging. “Those who rigged elections should think about their fate,” he said.

PML-N Vice President Maryam Nawaz, when pressed by the reporters to express her views, said, “We agree to what Maulana Fazlur Rehman said.”

Contrary to the opposition leaders’ consensus, the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) still has reservations about submitting resignations from the assemblies and wants a proper resistance and game plan in place before going ahead with this tough option.

According to sources, the PPP has decided to take up the issue in a meeting of its Central Executive Committee for the final decision.

Though Chairman PPP Bilawal Bhutto Zardari stood close to the PDM chief Fazlur Rehman during a press conference on Tuesday in which he announced submission of resignations by December 31, the PPP communicated its reservations about exercising this option.

The party is of opinion that resignations should be the last option and first all the options of resistance should be explored.

During the PDM meeting, according to sources, when the PPP leadership asked about the future game plan in case the resignations were not accepted, it got no answer.

During the meeting, a senior PPP leader asked what will happen if the government did not accept the resignations and kept them pending or accepted resignations in phases for holding by-election. The PPP believes that a clear strategy should be devised rather than taking a hasty decision.

PPP sources said the example of PTI resignations from the National Assembly was in front of everyone when their resignations were not accepted and Speaker National Assembly held them until the PTI ended its sit-in and all of its members returned to the assembly.

According to sources, after the PPP reservation, it was decided that resignations be submitted to the party leaders and a decision on when to exercise that option would be taken later on.

Accepting the PPP's proposal, it was decided to convene a meeting of the PDM steering committee to formulate a plan for resistance movement and the long march to Islamabad.

Sources in the PPP said there was an understanding between former president Asif Ali Zardari and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif that the decision of dissolving the Sindh government will be used as the last option.

Zardari believes that the Sindh government will prove as a backbone of resistance movement against the government. Sources said it was proposed by the PPP that first MNAs will submit their resignations followed by the members of Punjab Assembly, Balochistan Assembly and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly and if the resignations were accepted, then the Sindh Assembly members will also submit their resignations.

It was decided that the PPP and PML-N will hold a meeting on Wednesday (today) before the steering committee meeting to formulate the future game plan.

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Parliament right forum if dialogue desired: PM Imran Khan

Prime Minister Imran Khan on Wednesday said democracy will only work in the country if a national dialogue is held between the government and the opposition.

The premier said the constitutional way to send a government packing is to table a no-confidence motion in the Parliament and dared the opposition to do so. "If the opposition seeks to move a no-confidence motion, they should come and do so in the assemblies," he said, criticising the call for mass resignations from assemblies by Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman.

His remarks came during a conversation with journalists in the city in which he touched upon several issues, including the current political climate in the country, Pakistan's economy, corruption, and the aftermath of coronavirus, Geo News reported.

Speaking further of the resignations, which the opposition says will be handed in for both provincial as well as national assemblies, the prime minister said: "If they hand in resignations, we will hold by-elections on those seats and will emerge even stronger." "I do not understand what they aim to do," he added.

Imran Khan said that democracy will only work in the country if a national dialogue is held between the government and the opposition, adding that he has never backed down from the idea.

"The best place for political dialogue is the Parliament," the prime minister said. "I had said from the beginning that I was ready to answer all questions in the Parliament," he said. He went on to say that whenever the government talks about dialogue, the opposition starts demanding the closure of corruption cases against their leaders.

"Cases were filed against many opposition leaders during their own tenures," the premier revealed. "Ishaq Dar, Nawaz Sharif's children and his son-in-law all fled from the country in the past," he said. He reiterated that the government is ready to negotiate with the opposition on all matters except for corruption cases, which are unforgivable, and the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO). He said the opposition is crying for the fear of being caught, not for democracy. He said the opposition made cases against each other, and he could not end these cases.

When asked about the achievements of the PTI-led government over the years, PM Imran Khan said that PTI's biggest victory was to save the country from bankruptcy. "We had been historically facing a deficit in every sector. With massive debts and corruption, previous governments had left the country in dire straits. It was a big challenge for us to steer the country away from the crisis," the prime minister said.

He said that Pakistan's economy, through his government's concerted efforts, is finally progressing towards betterment. "Over the last decade, governments in power could only recover Rs6 billion in revenue. We, on the other hand, have retrieved Rs207 billion from Punjab alone within 27 months," he said.

The prime minister also talked about various development projects and different health-related initiatives in the country. Meanwhile, Imran Khan on Wednesday said in his address to the business community here that Sialkot had already been recognised as a unique centre of industry and export and in the coming times it was going to become a big centre of industrial activities in the country.

Adviser on Commerce Abdul Razak Daud, Federal Minister Hammad Azhar, Special Assistant to PM on Youth Affairs Usman Dar, Punjab Chief Minister Sardar Usman Buzdar, Adviser to CM on Information Dr Firdous Ashiq Awan and a number of leading local businessmen were also present on the occasion.

Imran Khan further said that Abdul Razak Daud and Hammad Azhar had been fully in touch with the business community of Sialkot in order to be fully aware of their problems and issues and then briefed him about that. He said the government was trying to utilise all the available resources in order to help and promote the industrial sector and properly appreciate the industrialist community in the country. He opined that solid-based industrialisation in the country was essential for the production of wealth and the opportunities of employment. He said that in the 1960s the industrial progress and economic growth in the country was quite phenomenal, but the launching of anti-business and anti-industry policies in 1970s badly affected that process of growth and progress.

Imran Khan said that the current government was the first in the country to sincerely and seriously launch industrialisation on solid basis. He said that removing hurdles in the way of industrialisation and enhancement of the opportunities of investment was the main object of the government that would also help in the alleviation poverty.

Imran Khan highly appreciated the Sialkot-based business community for undertaking and achieving many mega projects for the social welfare and the growth of business. He showed full confidence that Sialkot-based business community would successfully manage and run Air Sial, like it had run and manage the Sialkot International Airport earlier. He viewed that Air Sial (an airline launched by the businessmen of Sialkot) would not only help the Sialkot-based businessmen, but it would also help in creating an atmosphere of positive competition for other airlines including national flag carrier Pakistan International Airlines (PIA).

Imran Khan said the government had taken tough decisions of implementing lockdown when the first wave of COVID-19 started, but with the help of Allah Almighty and cooperation from the public, Pakistan suffered little as compared to the rest of the world including India. He said that Pakistan was among those seven countries mentioned by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for successfully handling the first wave of the pandemic. He said that Pakistan was quite lucky where number of the casualties caused by COVID-19 in seven months was far lesser than

the number of deaths in developed countries, like US and UK, in even a few days or weeks.

The prime minister said that the opposition parties initially criticised the government for not taking tough measures to avoid COVID-19, but currently they were busy in violation of the standard operating procedures (SOPs) against coronavirus by holding public meetings thus causing the spread of the pandemic. He said that care and caution regarding COVID-19 from every citizen was the only way to avoid casualties in the current second phase of the epidemic. He urged the people to use facemasks and strictly follow the SOPs in order to ensure their safety and safety of others against the current second wave of COVID-19. He said the country is heading for a difficult winter if corona SOPs were not followed.

The prime minister said uplift and far off and neglected areas in Punjab, Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was one of the top-most priorities of his government because no country could achieve real meaningful progress with focusing on only a few areas for development and neglecting so many. He appreciated the Chinese model of economic progress where more than 700 million people were pulled out of poverty within 35 years and now China is an economic giant. He said that China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was highly beneficial for Pakistan, but it was also key to economically promote and develop the far-off areas of Western China by linking them with sea. He expressed his wish to adopt Chinese model for the progress of the industrial sector of Pakistan. He said the government was trying to promote Sialkot, Gujranwala, Wazirabad, Gujrat, Faisalabad and Karachi as new vigorous centres of industry and export for Pakistan.

Earlier, Imran Khan inaugurated Air Sial, and later he also attended different ceremonies. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Imran Khan Wednesday welcomed US President-elect Biden's declared intent of a policy targeting dirty money and said developing countries were being impoverished by their corrupt elites.

In a tweet, the prime minister said, "I welcome US President-elect Biden's declared intent of a policy targeting dirty money. Developing countries are being impoverished by their corrupt elites who launder money to richer countries and offshore tax havens."