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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 6-4-2024

India dismisses report claiming it ordered targeted killings of wanted terrorists in Pakistan

The fresh claims relate to 20 killings since 2020 which have been carried out by unknown gunmen in Pakistan

IANIS

New Delhi, The Indian government got 'individuals' killed in Pakistan as part of Delhi's larger strategy to eliminate wanted terrorists living on foreign soil, 'The Guardian', a renowned global newspaper, claimed in a report on Thursday quoting some "intelligence operatives of India and Pakistan".

The London-based daily claims to have some documents that "shed light on how India's foreign intelligence agency allegedly carried out operations to eliminate the individuals abroad".

The report says that India carried out these operations "as part of an emboldened approach to national security after 2019".

The report comes amid allegations that India is targeting individuals whom it considers hostile to it.

According to the report, the fresh claims relate to almost 20 killings since 2020 which have been carried out by unknown gunmen in Pakistan.

'The Guardian' report says, "While India has previously been unofficially linked to the deaths, this is the first time Indian intelligence personnel have discussed the alleged operations in Pakistan, and detailed documentation has been seen alleging RAW's direct involvement in the assassinations".

The fresh allegations refer to those charged with violent terror offences.

When Muhammad Riaz and Shahid Latif were gunned down in 2023 on Pakistan soil, Islamabad had accused India's intelligence agency of being behind the killings.

New Delhi was then quick to dismiss the allegations, calling them "malicious anti-India propaganda".

Referring to the details shared by the Pakistani investigators, the London-based newspaper said that "these deaths were orchestrated by Indian intelligence sleeper cells, mostly operating out of the United Arab Emirates".

"The rise in killings in 2023 was credited to the increased activity of these cells, which are accused of paying millions of rupees to local criminals or poor Pakistanis to carry out the assassinations."

According to the report, "Indian agents also allegedly recruited jihadists to carry out the shootings."

Similarly, the report says quoting two Indian intelligence officers that the spy agency's action was triggered by the Pulwama attack in 2019, which was perpetrated by the Pakistan-based terror group Jaish-e-Mohammed.

The report also says that "after Pulwama, the approach changed to target the elements outside the country before they are able to launch an attack or create any disturbance".

Quoting one Indian intelligence operative, the report says, "We could not stop the attacks because ultimately their safe havens were in Pakistan, so we had to get to the source."

The Guardian also says that in response to its queries, the Ministry of External Affairs denied all the allegations, reiterating an earlier statement that they were "false and malicious anti-India propaganda".

The ministry emphasised a previous denial made by External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar that targeted killings in other countries were "not the government of India's policy".

According to the report, an RAW handler allegedly paid for information on Zahid Akhund, an alias for the convicted Kashmiri terrorist Zahoor Mistry who was involved in the hijacking of an Air India flight.

"Millions of rupees were then allegedly paid to Afghan nationals to carry out the shooting in Karachi in March 2022. They fled over the border but their handlers were later arrested by Pakistani security agencies," says the report.

Jaish-e-Mohammed commander Shahid Latif was killed on Pakistan soil.

The report says that Pakistani investigators found that the man had allegedly been paid 1.5 million Pakistani rupees (£4,000) by an undercover Indian agent to track down Latif and later was promised 15 million Pakistani rupees and his own catering company in the UAE if he carried out the killing.

The young man shot Latif dead at a mosque in Sialkot, but was arrested soon after, along with his accomplices, says the report.

The killings of Bashir Ahmad Peer, commander of the militant outfit Hizbul Mujahideen, and Saleem Rehmani, who was on India's most-wanted list, were also allegedly planned out of the UAE, with transaction receipts from Dubai appearing to show payments of millions of rupees to the killers, says the report.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 6-4-2024

UK media report ISI ploy to cause rift between India, friendly nations: Intel

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, The Guardian report alleging that the Indian government had overseen killing of 20 persons in Pakistan for involvement in terrorism, based on extensive briefings and documents supplied by ISI spy agency, aims to create discord between India and the UAE, said intelligence sources here on Friday.

Many of the allegations about the alleged involvement of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) had already been aired, including in articles in the western press as well as by Pakistan Foreign Secretary at a press conference in January this year.

The article would also sow suspicion in Mauritius, Nepal and Maldives as the ISI briefings have apparently claimed that RAW had conducted its plotting in these countries. However, the references to the UAE seem more serious because The Guardian has claimed, without any evidence, that RAW had sleeper cells in the country, they said.

The article has claimed that several assassinations in Pakistan were plotted in the UAE. It alleges that RAW had recruited the killer of Jaish-e-Mohammed commander Shahid Latif in the UAE, where he was "working for a minimal salary in an Amazon packing warehouse". The killings of Hizbul commanders Bashir Ahmad Peer and Saleem Rehmani too was allegedly planned in the UAE with the ISI claiming to be in possession of receipts originating in Dubai regarding payments to the killers. The report has also roped in the Taliban with which the Pakistani establishment has suffered a serious downturn in ties. The killing of Khalistani terrorist Paramjit Singh Panjwar, sheltered by Pakistan for decades, it alleges, was the work of activists from Islamic State (IS) and units connected to the Taliban who prepared Pakistani radicals to kill him.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 6-4-2024

Rajnath Singh reacts to Guardian report claiming India carrying out assassinations in Pakistan: 'If any terrorist...'

HT News Desk

Rajnath Singh reacted to the Guardian's report claiming India ordered killings of at least 20 terrorists inside Pakistan since 2020.

Defence minister Rajnath Singh on Friday said no Pakistani terrorist trying to disturb India from across the border will be spared. He was reacting to a report by the *Guardian* that the Indian government ordered at least 20 assassinations on Pakistan soil since 2020.

"If any terrorist tries to disturb India from Pakistan, we will give *muh tod jawab* (befitting reply). If needed, *Pakistan mein ghus ke marenge* (Will enter Pakistan and kill). If someone will try to disturb India with terror, *uski khair nahi hai* (he will not be spared)," the defence minister said in an interview to News18.

On PM Modi's old '*Ghar me ghus ke maarenge*' statement, Rajnath Singh said, "Whatever PM Modi had said is correct as India has that power and now Pakistan also realises this."

"India has always wanted to have a good relationship with the neighbouring countries. India has never

attacked any country, it has neither occupied an inch of any other country's land. But those who target India repeatedly, enter India and spread terrorism will not be spared," Rajnath Singh said.

The Guardian report published on Thursday claimed since the Pulwama attack in 2019, India's intelligence agency RAW carried out assassinations inside Pakistan. The report said these deaths were "orchestrated by Indian intelligence sleeper cells mostly operating out of the United Arab Emirates". *The Guardian* report quoted unnamed intelligence sources and said India drew "inspiration from Israel's Mossad and Russia's KGB".

The Guardian reached out to the external affairs ministry for its comment on the findings of their investigation. The MEA denied all the allegations, reiterating an earlier statement that they were "false and malicious anti-India propaganda".

The report cited the killing of Zahid Akhund, Shahid Latif, Bashir Ahmad Peer, Saleem Rehmani -- all known terrorists. It said Pakistani authorities have been reluctant to publicly acknowledge the killings as these targets were known terrorists.

The report also detailed how the 'killings' were done. "According to the evidence gathered by Pakistan, the killings were regularly coordinated out of the UAE, where Raw established sleeper cells that would separately arrange different parts of the operation and recruit the killers," the report said.

Millions of rupees would often be paid to criminals to carry out these murders and the payments were mostly done via Dubai, it said. The RAW handlers overseeing these killings met in Nepal, the Maldives and Mauritius.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 14-4-2024

Terrorists don't play by rules, so country's response to them can't have rules: EAM Jaishankar

Jaishankar also says that country's foreign policy has undergone change since 2014 and it is the way terrorism is dealt with

PTI

Pune, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has said that India was committed to respond to any act of terrorism perpetrated from across the borders, and asserted that since terrorists do not play by rules, there cannot be any rules in the country's answer to them.

Attacking the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) dispensation over its response to the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks in 2008, he said that after a lot of deliberation at the government level, nothing fruitful came out at that time as it was felt that the cost of attacking Pakistan was more than not attacking it.

Interacting with youth on Friday at an event titled 'Why Bharat Matters: Opportunity for youth and participation

in global scenario' here, he asked that if a similar attack happens now and one does not react to it, how can the next such attacks be prevented.

Jaishankar also said that the country's foreign policy has undergone a change since 2014 and it is the way terrorism is dealt with.

When asked about countries with which India finds it challenging to maintain relationships, Jaishankar said India should question whether it should maintain any relationship with certain countries.

"Well, one is just next to us. Let us be honest, the one country that is very, very difficult is Pakistan, and for that, we should only introspect why. One reason for this is us," he said.

He added that had India been clear from the start that Pakistan was indulging in terrorism, which India should not tolerate under any circumstances, the country would have had a vastly different policy.

"In 2014, Modi ji came. But this problem (terrorism) did not start in 2014. It did not begin with the Mumbai attack. It happened in 1947. In 1947, the first people (invaders) came to Kashmir, they attacked Kashmir. It was an act of terrorism. They were burning down villages and towns. They were killing people. These people were tribals from Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province. The Pakistan army backed them. We sent the army, and the integration of Kashmir took place," Jaishankar said.

"While the Indian army was taking action, we stopped in the middle and went to the UN, mentioning that the attack was by tribal invaders instead of terrorism, as if it was a legitimate force," he said.

He added that in the 1965 Indo-Pak war, Pakistan first sent infiltrators to sabotage.

"We have to be very clear in our minds about terrorism; under no circumstances is terrorism acceptable from any neighbour or from anyone who uses terrorism to force you to sit at the negotiating table. This should never be accepted," he said.

He mentioned that sometimes he is asked about the continuity in India's foreign policy and he responds clearly that there is 50 per cent continuity and 50 per cent change.

"One change is regarding terrorism. After the 26/11 Mumbai attack, there was not a single person in the country who felt that we should not have responded to the attack. Everybody in the country felt it. There is an account of that time. The NSA had written that this minister looked at it, that minister looked at it. Everybody deliberated, a lot of analysis took place, and then it was decided that the cost of attacking Pakistan is more than not attacking Pakistan. So after a lot of deliberation, nothing fruitful came out," he said.

He emphasized that if something like Mumbai happens and you do not react to it, how can you prevent the next one from happening? "They (terrorists) should not feel

that since they are across the border, no one can touch them. Terrorists do not play by any rules. The response to terrorists cannot have any rules," he said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 2-4-2024

Arunachal India's part: EAM S Jaishankar as China renames 30 sites

Surat, Arunachal Pradesh was, is, and will remain an Indian state in the future, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar asserted on Monday, days after China released 30 new names of various places in the border state. Addressing a press conference, Jaishankar said nothing would be gained by changing the names. "If I change the name of your house, will it become mine? Arunachal was an Indian state, is an Indian state and will remain so in the future. Nothing will be gained by changing names," said the minister.

He was responding to a question on Beijing's latest move to re-emphasise its claim over the Indian state. The Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs released the fourth list of standardised geographical names in Zangnan, the Chinese name for Arunachal Pradesh, which Beijing claims as part of south Tibet, state-run Global Times reported on Sunday.

The Chinese ministry had released the first list of six places in Zangnan in 2017, while the second list of 15 places was issued in 2021, followed by another with names for 11 places last year.

Responding to Ladakh-based climate activist Sonam Wangchuk's allegation that China had encroached upon Indian territory, the EAM said the Indian Army knew what to do in such situations. "Every activist has his own thoughts. See, you all know that our Army is already deployed there to stop any attempt of infiltration along the Line of Actual Control. The Army knows what they are supposed to do," he said. Queried on Indians being hired and forced to fight alongside the Russian Army on the Ukraine border, Jaishankar said the Indian Government had "strongly" raised the issue with Moscow after two Indians died in the war zone.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 6-4-2024

China carving out 175 more villages across Arunachal

*Already has 628 such 'prosperous settlements'
near LAC*

Ajay Banerjee

New Delhi, China is set to develop 175 more border villages on its side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) facing Arunachal Pradesh. These settlements will be in addition to the 628 "Xiaokang" or prosperous villages near the LAC.

Sources say these villages are apparently being set up to bolster territorial claims and enhance military readiness along the LAC, which is not demarcated on the ground. This move is part of a larger effort to construct 900 LAC villages, including 200 near the Indian boundary, which will function both as monitoring points and potential military bases in conflict scenario with India.

The Indian side is not just looking at the military-related motives of these settlements, but also the long-term implications. China could be looking to build a strong legal defence under the Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA), 2005, with India. The Article VII of the BDCA says “the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas”. So as and when a situation arises to demarcate the LAC, these “settled populations” villages are not likely to be disturbed, the sources say, adding that Indian villages facing these new settlements are currently very thinly populated.

In addition to creating these villages, China has undertaken extensive infrastructure development projects in Tibet and in areas near the LAC.

China’s 14th Five Year Plan (2021-2025) includes expansion of the Nyingchi phase of the Sichuan-Tibet railway line, preliminary work on the Hotan-Shigatse and Gyirong-Shigatse rail lines and the Chengdu-Wuhan-Shanghai high speed railway network.

The plan includes upgrading the national highways G-219 and G-318, both of which run parallel to India along the LAC. The G-219 is opposite Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh while the G-318 is opposite Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim.

Beijing’s dual goals of promoting the integration of Tibet into China and ramping up infrastructure development are seen as a strategy aimed at deepening Chinese influence and asserting its power in the region. Last week, in an attempt to cover up the “capture” of Tibet, the Chinese conducted celebratory ceremonies on its side of the LAC and labelled them as the “65th anniversary of democratic reform” in Xizang (Tibet). The illegal dissolution of the Tibetan government headed by the Dalai Lama took place on March 28, 1959. The celebratory ceremonies focused on two sites north of Arunachal Pradesh and one spot north of Sikkim.

Eyeing demarcation gains

China could be looking to build a strong legal defence under the Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA), 2005, with India

The Article VII of the BDCA says “the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas”

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 10-4-2024

China couldn’t encroach an inch of Indian land under Modi govt:

Amit Shah

HT Correspondent

The people of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh will never forget how former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru had said “bye-bye” to the two northeastern states during the 1962 Chinese aggression, Union home minister Amit Shah claimed on Tuesday, adding that China could not encroach a “single inch” of Indian land under the Narendra Modi government. Addressing a Lok Sabha poll rally in Lakhimpur district of Assam, Shah said the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led Union government secured the country’s border with Bangladesh and stopped infiltration.

“During the Chinese aggression of 1962, Nehru had said ‘bye-bye’ to Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. People of these states can never forget that,” Shah said. “But now, China could not encroach even a single inch of our land. Even in Doklam, we pushed them back.”

There was no immediate reaction available from the Congress to Shah’s comments.

His remarks come even as India and China have been locked in a military standoff along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh since May 2020, and a full resolution of the border crisis through ongoing negotiations appears elusive.

Attacking the previous Congress-led government, Shah said Assam’s border with Bangladesh was earlier “open for infiltration” and credited the BJP governments at the Centre and in the state for “stopping infiltration.”

Shah further noted that the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act — which grants special powers to armed forces to maintain law and order in “disturbed areas” — has been withdrawn from 80% of areas of the state.

Polling for all 14 Lok Sabha seats in Assam will be held in three phases on April 19, April 26 and May 7. Lakhimpur will vote in the first phase.

Seeking vote for the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) candidates, Shah said the development of the Northeast is centre to the overall growth of the nation.

“There are two alternatives before you — to vote for (Congress leader) Rahul Gandhi and INDI Alliance, or vote for the Modi-led BJP,” he told the gathering.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 11-4-2024

Hopeful India, China will be able to restore peace at borders through bilateral engagement: PM Modi

'It is my belief that we need to urgently address the prolonged situation on our borders so that the abnormality in our bilateral interactions can be put behind us. Stable and peaceful relations between India and China are important for not just our two countries but the entire region and world'

PTI, New Delhi

Asserting that stable and peaceful relations between India and China are important for the entire region and the world, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has expressed hope that through positive and constructive bilateral engagement at the diplomatic and military levels, the two countries will be able to restore and sustain peace and tranquillity at their borders.

In an interview with Newsweek magazine of the US, Modi said for India, the relationship with China is important and significant.

"It is my belief that we need to urgently address the prolonged situation on our borders so that the abnormality in our bilateral interactions can be put behind us. Stable and peaceful relations between India and China are important for not just our two countries but the entire region and world," he said.

"I hope and believe that through positive and constructive bilateral engagement at the diplomatic and military levels, we will be able to restore and sustain peace and tranquillity in our borders," Modi said.

During the wide-ranging interview with the New York-based magazine, the prime minister talked about a host of issues including the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, ties with Pakistan, Quad, Ram temple and democracy, among others.

Asked about ties with Pakistan, Modi said he has congratulated the prime minister of Pakistan on taking over office and asserted that India has always advocated for advancing peace, security and prosperity in the region in an atmosphere free from terror and violence.

On the imprisonment of former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan, Modi said, "I won't comment on matters internal to Pakistan." Talking about China and the Quad grouping, the prime minister said the US, Australia, Japan, India, China are members of many groups.

"We are present in different combinations in different groups. Quad is not aimed against any country. Like many other international groupings, like SCO, BRICS and others, Quad is also a group of like-minded countries working on a shared positive agenda," he said. The Quad grouping comprises India, the US, Australia and Japan.

On criticism of abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status, Modi said, "I would encourage you to visit Jammu and Kashmir to witness firsthand the sweeping positive changes happening on (the) ground. Do not go by what I or others tell you. I went to Jammu and Kashmir just last month. For the first time, people have a new hope in their lives." "The process of development, good governance and empowerment of the people is to be seen to be believed," he said.

"People are reaping the peace dividend: Over 21 million tourists visited Jammu and Kashmir in 2023. There has been a significant decline in terror incidents. Organized bandh/hartals (protests), stone pelting, which once disrupted normal life, are now a thing of the past," the prime minister said.

On the significance of the newly-inaugurated Ram temple at Ayodhya, Modi said the name of Shri Ram is imprinted on our national consciousness.

"His (Lord Ram) life has set the contours of thoughts and values in our civilization. His name echoes across the length and breadth of our sacred land. Therefore, during the 11-day special ritual I observed, I made a pilgrimage to the places that carry the footprints of Shri Ram. My journey that took me to various corners of the country showed the revered place Shri Ram holds within each of us," he said.

"The return of Shri Ram to his birthplace marked a historic moment of unity for the nation. It was a culmination of centuries of perseverance and sacrifice. When I was asked to be part of the ceremony, I knew I would be representing the 1.4 billion people of the country, who have waited patiently for centuries to witness Ram Lalla's return," he said.

"During the 11 days leading up to this auspicious event, I carried with me the aspirations of countless devotees, eagerly anticipating this day. The ceremony itself brought the nation together into a celebration, akin to a second Diwali. Every home was illuminated by the light of Ram Jyoti. I see it as a divine blessing that I could experience the consecration ceremony as a representative of 1.4 billion Indians," he said.

On the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, Modi said his government has an excellent track record of fulfilling promises.

"By the end of the second term, even the most popular governments start losing support. Discontent toward governments has also increased in the last few years in the world. India stands out as an exception, where popular support for our government is increasing," he asserted.

Hailing India as "the mother of democracy", Modi said that as the largest democracy in the world, over 600 million people voted in the General Elections in 2019 and in a few months from now, over 970 million eligible voters will exercise their franchise.

"More than one million polling stations would be set up across India. Constantly increasing voter participation is a big certificate for the people's faith in Indian democracy. A democracy like India is able to move ahead and function only because there is a vibrant feedback mechanism. And our media plays an important role in this regard. We have around 1.5 lakh (150,000) registered media publications and hundreds of news channels," he said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-4-2024

'Sound and stable ties serve common interests': China reacts to PM Modi's border row comments

Relations between the two sides nosedived ever since eastern Ladakh border standoff erupted on May 5, 2020

PTI

Beijing, China on Thursday said that "sound and stable ties" serve the common interests of China and India as it reacted to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remarks that for New Delhi, ties with Beijing are important and the "prolonged situation" at the borders should be addressed urgently.

In an interview with Newsweek magazine, which described India's rise as "unstoppable", Prime Minister Modi expressed hope that through positive and constructive bilateral engagement at the diplomatic and military levels, the two countries will be able to restore and sustain peace and tranquillity at their borders.

"China noted Prime Minister Modi's remarks," Chinese spokesperson Mao Ning told a media briefing here when asked for her reaction to Modi's interview.

"Sound and stable China-India relations serve the interests of both countries and are conducive to peace and development in the region and beyond," she said.

In his interview, which is the first to be given to a US magazine in the recent past, Modi said that for India, the relationship with China is important and significant. "It is my belief that we need to urgently address the prolonged situation on our borders so that the abnormality in our bilateral interactions can be put behind us. Stable and peaceful relations between India and China are important for not just our two countries but the entire region and world," he said.

On the boundary question, Mao reiterated China's oft-repeated stand that it does not "represent the entirety of China-India relations, and it should be placed appropriately in bilateral relations and managed properly".

However, India has maintained that there cannot be restoration of normalcy in its relations with China as long as the state of the borders remains abnormal.

She said both countries maintain close communication through diplomatic and military channels on handling

issues related to the border situation and have made positive progress.

"We hope that India will work with China, approach the bilateral relations from a strategic height and long-term perspective, keep building trust and engage in dialogue and cooperation, and seek to handle differences appropriately to put the relationship on a sound and stable track," she said.

Meanwhile, Modi's remarks were welcomed by the official media here, which termed it a "gesture of goodwill". "In a welcome move that may give a timely boost to the development of peaceful and stable China-India relations, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has expressed the wish for the two neighbouring countries to 'urgently' resolve their long-standing border disputes," the state-run China Daily said in its editorial.

"Modi's latest remarks could be interpreted as a gesture of goodwill, as the two sides try to find a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable settlement to their border disputes at an early date and turn the final page on them," it further said. That the two countries have kept the talks on the ground and the consultation mechanism running provides grounds for optimism that they will be able to not only continue to uphold peace along the border under bilateral agreements and protocols but also begin a new chapter of friendly bilateral relations, the editorial said.

The relations between India and China have been frozen except for trade ties ever since the eastern Ladakh border standoff erupted on May 5, 2020, following a violent clash in the Pangong Tso (lake) area. The two sides have so far held 21 rounds of corps commander-level talks to resolve the standoff. According to the Chinese military, the two sides so far agreed to disengage from four points, namely the Galwan Valley, the Pangong Lake, Hot Springs, and Jianan Daban (Gogra).

India is pressing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to disengage from the Depsang and Demchok areas, maintaining that there cannot be restoration of normalcy in its relations with China as long as the border issue remains tense.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 15-4-2024

2nd batch of Indian troops has left Maldives: President Mohamed Muizzu

PTI

Male, The second batch of the Indian military personnel manning a helicopter gifted by India to the Maldives has left the island nation as demanded by him, President Mohamed Muizzu has said.

Muizzu, a pro-China leader, also reaffirmed that foreign ambassadors in Male would not wield authority over

him, emphasising that ultimate power rested with the citizens.

He announced the withdrawal of the second Indian military contingent from the Maldives while speaking during a campaign event for the ruling People's National Congress party candidates ahead of the parliamentary elections scheduled to be held on April 21. "The first team has already gone. Now, on April 9, the soldiers on the second platform have also been withdrawn... there is only one platform left. As the two countries have already signed, they (the remaining Indian military personnel) will also be recalled ahead of May 10. They will leave," Muizzu. said.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 6-4-2024

On Maldives' request, India clears export of food items including rice, wheat

Rezaul H Laskar

The clearance for the exports comes at a time when ties between India and the Maldives are at a low, especially after the election of Prez Mohamed Muizzu

NEW DELHI: The Indian government has cleared the supply of several essential commodities to the Maldives, including items such as rice, wheat and onions whose exports are currently banned, amid a downturn in relations between the two sides.

The government allowed the export of these commodities for 2024-25 under a bilateral mechanism at the request of the Maldivian government, the Indian high commission in Male said in a statement on Friday. The approved quantities are also the highest since the mechanism was put in place in 1981.

The clearance for the exports comes at a time when ties between India and the Maldives are at a low, especially after the election last year of President Mohamed Muizzu, who has sought to end the Indian archipelago's dependence on India in strategic sectors. Muizzu has also moved the Maldives closer to China.

"The quota for river sand and stone aggregates, crucial items for the booming construction industry in the Maldives, have been increased by 25% to 1,000 MT. There has also been an increase of 5% in the quotas for eggs, potatoes, onions, sugar, rice, wheat flour and dal (pulses)," the statement said.

India banned wheat exports in May 2022 and non-basmati rice exports in July 2023 to cater to domestic requirements. The government also banned the export of onions for about four months last December. However, India has supplied rice, wheat and onions to countries in the neighbourhood, such as Bangladesh, and key partners, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Indonesia, on a case-to-case basis.

The statement noted that India continued supplying rice, sugar and onions to the Maldives last year despite a ban

on exporting these items. "India remains strongly committed to supporting human-centric development in the Maldives, as part of its 'Neighbourhood First' policy," it said.

According to an official notification, India will supply one million tonnes each of river sand and stone aggregates to the Maldives during 2024-25. It will supply 35,749 tonnes of onions, 124,218 tonnes of rice, 109,162 tonnes of wheat and 64,494 tonnes of sugar during this period.

These exports will be exempted from "any existing or future restriction/prohibition during 2024-25". Without naming India, Muizzu has repeatedly said in recent weeks that he intends to reduce the Maldives' dependence on any one country for food security.

In keeping with a demand by Muizzu, India has also begun replacing some 80 military personnel deployed in the Maldives to operate three aircraft with civilian personnel. The aircraft are mainly used for humanitarian assistance operations and medical evacuations.

Apart from finalising arrangements with Sri Lanka for medical evacuation services, Muizzu's government signed an agreement with Turkiye to supply food items such as flour. The Maldives also inked a pact with Turkiye for drones to be used for maritime surveillance, and another with China for supplying non-lethal military equipment and training.

Muizzu has also announced the Maldives will begin directly importing medicines from European pharmaceutical companies. In recent decades, Maldives has largely depended on India for food items and medicines.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 13-4-2024

Lloyd Austin: New chapter in India-US military relations set to begin

Ajay Banerjee

New Delhi, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has said that a new chapter in the US-India relations is set to begin under "our major defence partnership".

Briefing the US Senate Armed Services Committee on his country's budget, he said the militaries of the two countries were accelerating joint exercises, information-sharing, and other operational activities to boost maritime security in the Indian Ocean. "By bolstering the Indian military's capabilities, the nations can work together to uphold a more stable balance of power across the wider Indo-Pacific," Austin said. The Senate was briefed on April 9.

The US, he said, was committed to ensuring that the growing US-India partnership supported the efforts of the broader network of allies and partners, especially the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States.

Austin described the relationship with India as part of his argument at the Senate seeking a defence budget of \$849.8 billion for the US fiscal starting January 1, 2025.

Austin said the budget would continue to challenge the growing, multi-domain challenge posed by an increasingly aggressive China. Beijing, he said, was trying to shape the global system to suit its authoritarian preferences.

On the Indo-Pacific, he said, “We also seek a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region in which all countries are free from coercion.”

The US is making improvements to its force posture in the Indo-Pacific. Last year was the most transformative year for the US force posture in Asia. Austin described it as “major infrastructure improvements in airfields, logistics, and domain awareness across the region”.

This is the second specific reference to the US-India military ties in the past four weeks. At the congressional hearing on the Indo-Pacific on March 20, Admiral John C Aquilino of the US Indo-Pacific Command had said that a strong US-India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership was essential to a free and open Indo-Pacific amidst China’s assertive moves in the region.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 12-4-2024

Despite polls, India-US ties set to get stronger

Mukesh Aghi

In 2024, around 3.5 billion people out of the planet’s eight billion will head to the polls. Two of the most widely anticipated elections will be in two of the world’s largest democracies, India and the United States (US). Washington picks a new leader every four years, while New Delhi picks a new government every five, and once in two decades, by the laws of mathematics, the election year coincides. Electioneering, campaigning, and political sloganeering are underway in both nations.

Democracies are inherently noisy, and vibrant media houses and cantankerous social media throw up all sorts of prognostications. Some political pundits have pontificated that India-US relations are on a downward spiral. This is far from the truth.

In all democracies, on a normal day, there are contrasting opinions, colourful conversations, and loud debates. In both the US and India, there are political figures that go astray and are subject to legal jurisprudence. Recently, in both countries, leading political figures fell out of favour with the political establishment. Much has been spoken about in the media and critiques of the political system have been brought to the forefront.

However, the legal precedence in all democratic establishments takes its course and it behoves allies and strategic partners to not intervene.

The India-US strategic partnership is truly bipartisan and politically agnostic. While some independent commentators may differ on sentiment, the statistics speak for themselves. Since India’s 1991 reforms, the onset of liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation has meant that the allure of a large global commercial market has fructified economic relations between the two countries.

India-US trade went from a negligible \$2 million over three decades ago to a point now where Washington is New Delhi’s top trading partner, with bilateral trade currently estimated at approximately \$200 billion. It is expected to reach \$500 billion in the coming years, with growth in newer areas such as defence, agriculture, space, climate, energy, health, and education as well as critical and emerging technologies like semiconductors, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and quantum computing. In 2023 alone, India-US relations culminated in one of the most productive years for the partnership. An epochal year marked by only the third State visit by an Indian leader to Washington.

The diplomatic momentum gained from a historic State visit extended beyond pomp and platitudes. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Joe Biden put together a strategic roadmap with new dialogues and initiatives in multifaceted areas such as clean energy cooperation, education, space collaboration, semiconductors, quantum computing, drone technology, and artificial intelligence. There were monumental agreements in accelerated joint projects such as manufacturing GE F-414 jet engines in India, putting India in the elite club of countries with such manufacturing capability.

Washington and New Delhi have continued to build on deep defence synergy in new areas of critical and emerging technology with initiatives launched in 2023 such as the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), and INDUS-X. Together, with their Quad partners Australia and Japan, both India and the US continue to remain steadfast in securing a free and open Indo-Pacific. They have also been successful in building new economic corridors of trust in the landmark India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC), which compliments a West Asia Quad in I2U2 (featuring India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the US). The successes of 2023 continue this year as both countries work on building new trade links, enhancing digital connectivity, creating clean energy corridors, and strengthening the I2U2 collaboration in West Asia.

Furthermore, Biden was supportive of India’s presidency at the 2023 G20 summit, which capped a monumental year for India and marked Biden’s first visit to India as US President. At a time of global conflict, India’s adroit diplomacy at the G20 summit saw world leaders make a clarion call for peace and use diplomacy as a primary tool for conflict resolution. New

Delhi was successful in speaking for global equity and a more egalitarian world, battling for the Global South, particularly for the inclusion of the African Union in the G20.

In the past, there have been valid critiques about India's system being far too protectionist and bureaucratic. Today, the country is the fastest-growing major economy and the most populous nation in the world. With a demographic dividend, the country has a bolder vision on the world stage and global aspirations. It continues to engage other partners both bilaterally and through mini-laterals and multilateral forums.

India has privatised traditionally protected sectors such as defence and space, and even its national carrier Air India. India's historic landing of Chandrayaan-3 paves the way for deeper space collaboration between the two countries, and under INDUS-X, room for more growth for investors in space startups.

The US and India will further cement their bilateral partnership at this year's 2+2 dialogue between the foreign and defence leaders and the Quad Leader's Summit, which New Delhi will host. But, of course, foreign policy temporarily takes a backseat as six weeks of voting begin.

The US elections, while some months away, present Herculean hurdles for the incumbent president. While President Biden has had domestic success to boast of in the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and CHIPS and Sciences Act, the deteriorating situation in West Asia, extended wars in Ukraine, hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the rise of a belligerent China continue to see his poll numbers dwindle. The larger story is that while the US and India news cycles will be dominated by political discourse, the commercial trajectory remains on an upward trend. Irrespective of political fortunes changing, the economic fortunes remain the same, reinforcing the strong bonds between the two nations.

Mukesh Aghi is the president and chief executive officer of the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum. The views expressed are personal

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 4-4-2024

Disingenuous: Editorial on Modi and Jaishankar's decision to rake up agreement with Sri Lanka over Katchatheevu

For Mr Modi and Mr Jaishankar to attempt an about-turn on India's long-standing position days before Tamil Nadu votes in the general election bares their weakness for political opportunism

The decision by the prime minister, Narendra Modi, and the external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, to rake up a 50-year-old agreement with Sri Lanka over the

Katchatheevu island on the eve of the Lok Sabha election is disingenuous, even dangerous, for India. Politicians in Tamil Nadu have for long pandered to emotions tied to territorialism to claim the island, which New Delhi and Colombo agreed, in 1974 and in 1976, fell within Sri Lanka's maritime boundary. But successive Indian governments, including that of Mr Modi, have repeatedly emphasised that New Delhi's acknowledgement of Katchatheevu as Sri Lankan territory was not at the cost of Indian interests. In 2015, when Mr Jaishankar was foreign secretary, the ministry of external affairs in a Right to Information Act reply rejected suggestions that India under the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, of the Congress had ceded Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka. For Mr Modi and Mr Jaishankar to attempt an about-turn on India's long-standing position days before Tamil Nadu votes in the general election bares their weakness for political opportunism. Perhaps there is more to this tale. Stoking the Katchatheevu controversy could help deflect public attention from the refusal of Mr Modi and his government to even recognise the significant encroachment on Indian territory by Chinese troops in Ladakh over the past four years despite substantial evidence pointing to the loss of territory under the prime minister's watch.

Mr Modi's new position on Katchatheevu also risks India's credibility as a trusted partner in its neighbourhood. Agreements between sovereign governments that are delivered through diplomacy, not war or coercion, are not partisan or personal commitments: countries expect others to honour them irrespective of who is in power. If Mr Modi and Mr Jaishankar today start questioning the Katchatheevu agreement with Sri Lanka, Colombo and other capitals of bordering nations could well wonder which other bilateral pacts might next become subject to historical revisionism.

In 2014, Mr Modi's government decided to accept a United Nations tribunal's verdict giving Bangladesh the giant chunk of maritime territory previously disputed between New Delhi and Dhaka. Should Dhaka worry, for instance, that a future Indian government might challenge that decision to score political points against Mr Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party? At a time when laws like the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and nationalist jingoism have already complicated New Delhi's diplomatic ties with other neighbours, the Katchatheevu claims threaten to inject tensions into the ties with Sri Lanka too. A stable, calm South Asia is in India's interests. Chasing windmills over an Indian Ocean island is not in New Delhi's interests.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 3-4-2024

Katchatheevu and Wadge Bank: the story of two India-Sri Lanka agreements from a half century ago

Arun Janardhanan

Weeks before voting for the Lok Sabha election in Tamil Nadu, the BJP has reignited the decades-old Katchatheevu issue, accusing the Indira Gandhi government of “callously giving away”, as the Prime Minister said in a post on social media, the island to Sri Lanka.

Did India indeed “cede” Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka in 1974? What happened two years later, in 1976, when India signed a second agreement with Sri Lanka? These questions ponder the import of decisions taken a half century ago, weighing the trading of territorial claims for maritime advantages and broad strategic interests off the coast of Kanyakumari.

But first, what is Katchatheevu island?

Katchatheevu is a 285-acre patch in the sea within the maritime boundary line of Sri Lanka, located 33 km off the Indian coast to the northeast of Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu, and southwest of Sri Lanka’s Delft Island. The tiny, barren island which, according to some official reports, was created following a 14th-century volcanic eruption, is 1.6 km in length and just 300 metres wide at its widest point.

The island was under the control of the kingdom of the Ramanad Raja, a zamindari from 1795 to 1803 in Ramanathapuram in the Madras Presidency during British rule. The 120-year-old St Anthony’s Church on the island attracts devotees from India and Sri Lanka for an annual festival.

What happened to the Island in 1974?

India and Sri Lanka had been claiming Katchatheevu since at least 1921, after a survey placed the island within Sri Lanka’s boundaries. This was contested by a British Indian delegation that cited the Ramanad kingdom’s ownership of the island. The dispute could not be settled, and continued in the years after Independence.

In 1974, when Indira was Prime Minister, the two governments signed — on June 26 in Colombo and June 28 in New Delhi — an agreement by which the island went to Sri Lanka, but Indian fishermen were given “access to Katchatheevu for rest, for drying of nets and for the annual St Anthony’s festival”.

“Indian fishermen and pilgrims will enjoy access to visit Katchatheevu as hitherto, and will not be required by Sri Lanka to obtain travel documents or visas for these purposes,” the agreement said. The agreement did not specify the fishing rights of Indian fishermen.

According to information obtained by Tamil Nadu BJP chief K Annamalai under The RTI Act, 2005, the DMK

government in Tamil Nadu led by M Karunanidhi at the time silently acquiesced to the Centre’s decision to sign the agreement. The RTI reply quoted from the minutes of a meeting between then External Affairs Minister Kewal Singh and Karunanidhi at Fort St. George in Chennai a month before the transfer of the island. According to Annamalai, Karunanidhi was “party to this decision”, and had only asked if it was possible to “postpone the decision by two years”.

Tamil Nadu Assembly records, however, show that Chief Minister Karunanidhi had attempted to move a resolution in the House in 1974 against the Katchatheevu agreement, but the opposition AIADMK had refused to go along.

And what happened in 1976?

In June 1975, Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency, and Karunanidhi’s government was dismissed in January 1976. Thereafter, several letters were exchanged between the foreign secretaries of India and Sri Lanka, and a set of executive orders were issued on the Katchatheevu issue.

The negotiations and the orders essentially settled the maritime boundary between India and Sri Lanka by giving sovereign rights over a maritime patch called ‘Wadge Bank’ near Kanyakumari to India. The Wadge Bank lies to the south of Kanyakumari, and has been identified by the Fishery Survey of India as a 4,000-sq-mile area bound by 76°30’ E to 78°00’ E longitude and 7°00’ N to 8° 20’ N latitude. It is one of the world’s richest fishing grounds, and in a much more strategic part of the sea than the island of Katchatheevu. This area near Kanyakumari has been significant for fishermen from Tamil Nadu and Kerala for more than four decades.

An agreement reached between the two countries in March 1976 said “the Wadge Bank...lies within the exclusive economic zone of India, and India shall have sovereign rights over the area and its resources” and “the fishing vessels of Sri Lanka and persons on board these vessels shall not engage in fishing in the Wadge Bank”.

However, “at the request of the Government of Sri Lanka and as a gesture of goodwill”, India agreed that Sri Lankan boats licensed by India could fish in the Wadge Bank for three years “from the date of establishment by India of its exclusive economic zone”. But no more than six Sri Lankan fishing vessels were allowed, and their catch in the Wadge Bank could not exceed 2,000 tonnes in any year.

The agreement also said that if India “decided to explore the Wadge Bank for petroleum and other mineral resources” during the three-year period, the Sri Lankan boats “shall terminate fishing activity... in these zones with effect from the date of commencement of exploration”.

What happened after the 1974 and 1976 agreements?

The focus in the 1970s was on settling competing claims over territorial boundaries, which led to agreements that gave Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka and the resource-rich Wadge Bank to India.

In the 1990s, the Palk Strait to the east of the Wadge Bank saw a proliferation of efficient bottom-trawl fishing trawlers on the Indian side. The Sri Lankan military was battling the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at the time, and its navy had no major presence in the sea region. Indian fishing boats would routinely enter Sri Lankan waters for fishing during this time.

In 1991, when J Jayalalithaa was in her first term as Chief Minister, the Tamil Nadu Assembly sought the retrieval of Katchatheevu and restoration of traditional fishing rights for Indian Tamil fishermen. But the demand could not be followed up with Sri Lanka due to the civil war in that country.

The situation changed after the war ended in 2009. Even as Indian fishermen continued to enter Sri Lankan waters due to the depletion of marine resources on the Indian side, the Sri Lankan navy began to carry out arrests, and destroyed hundreds of fishing boats for violating the maritime boundary. This provoked a renewed wave of demands from political parties in Tamil Nadu, including the DMK and AIADMK, to retrieve Katchatheevu.

How did Sri Lanka react to the demands from the Indian Tamil parties?

The two countries have signed an international agreement on Katchatheevu, and Sri Lanka has refused to link the status of the island with the Tamil fishermen's issue.

A Sri Lankan Cabinet Minister told The Indian Express on Monday that linking the two issues would be "inappropriate and inaccurate because the issue with regards to Indian fishermen is all about the bottom-trawlers they use for fishing outside Indian waters, which is illegal as per international maritime laws".

"When this huge exploitation and depletion of maritime resources happen in the entire ocean region, the victims of these trawlers owned by Indian Tamil fishermen are not Muslims or Sinhala fishermen but the Sri Lankan Tamil fishermen," the Sri Lankan Minister said.

And how did the matter reach the Supreme Court?

In 2008, Jayalalithaa filed a petition in the Supreme Court claiming Katchatheevu belonged to India, and could not be ceded to another country without a Constitutional amendment. She argued that the 1974 agreement affected the traditional fishing rights and livelihood options of Indian fishermen.

After becoming Chief Minister in 2011, Jayalalithaa moved a resolution in the state Assembly raising the same demand. In 2012, amid increasing incidents of arrests of Indian fishermen in Sri Lankan waters, she

again moved the Supreme Court to expedite her petition.

In August 2014, then Attorney General Mukul Rohatgi told the Supreme Court that the matter was closed, and it would require "war" to get the island back. "Katchatheevu went to Sri Lanka by an agreement in 1974. It was ceded and now acts as a boundary. How can it be taken back today? If you want Katchatheevu back, you will have to go to war to get it back," he said.

The petition remains pending in the Supreme Court.

Now that the issue has been raked up again, what happens hereafter?

The BJP leadership, including Prime Minister Modi, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, and state BJP chief Annamalai, have launched attacks on the Congress and DMK for allegedly surrendering the island to Sri Lanka. The PM has said that "weakening India's unity, integrity and interests has been Congress' way of working for 75 years", and "DMK has done NOTHING to safeguard Tamil Nadu's interests".

However, election campaign rhetoric aside, the Indian government does not seem to have made any concrete move to examine the possibility of retrieving the island for India. Asked what steps had been taken in this regard, Jaishankar said on Monday that "the matter is sub judice".

Jeevan Thondaman, a Tamil-origin Minister in Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe's Cabinet, told The Indian Express that there has been no official communication from India on the Katchatheevu island issue.

"Narendra Modi's foreign policy with Sri Lanka is organic and healthy. So far, there has not been an official communication from India to return the powers of Katchatheevu island. No such request from India so far. If there is such a communication, the foreign ministry will reply to that," he said.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 1-4-2024

‘Border killings rooted in discrimination against the marginalised’

Kirity Roy, secretary of Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM), a rights organisation based in West Bengal, India, discusses the underlying issues behind border killings at the Bangladesh-India border in an exclusive interview with Naimul Alam Alvi of The Daily Star.

The Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and India's Border Security Force (BSF), along with the governments on both sides, have repeatedly pledged to reduce border killings to zero. But this goal remains unmet. Why is it so?

One of the primary reasons behind killings at the Bangladesh-India border is that the border guards of

both countries are corrupt. Many BGB and BSF members profit from smuggling—be it human or cattle trafficking, or smuggling of other goods. Smugglers from both sides of the border pay money, and these individuals get their share. That’s why they turn a blind eye to these things. In some cases, there is retaliation, which sometimes ends in border killings. But the people who get killed are just carriers; the kingpins remain out of reach.

The Constitution of India clearly says that the state will not discriminate among people, and there will be no discriminatory policies. But it seems that for India, it is accepted that there’s a difference between the Bhutan or Nepal border and the Bangladesh border, based on how they are treated. There’s no opposition to this state of affairs from the governmental level, and no political parties are concerned about this. So this issue persists.

Why is there a different attitude towards the Bangladesh-India border?

When the subcontinent became “independent” from the British, without being fully decolonised, they divided two countries according to the two-nation theory—that Hindus and Muslims are different. When India and Pakistan were born, they had a hostile, antagonistic attitude towards each other, which still exists and is even being nurtured by religious political parties. I’m not saying all Hindus or all Muslims are against each other, but there is enough of this kind of attitude between the two groups across the subcontinent. Since 1971, Bangladesh has not been a part of Pakistan, but it seems that this truth has not been processed by many individuals in the Indian foreign ministry, the military, and the BSF. The BSF was formed in 1965 as a result of the Indo-Pak war. So, there is an innate narrative that “Pakistan is our enemy,” which has turned into “Muslims are our enemy.” This is projected towards Bangladesh as well.

The India that was promised in 1947 is not the same as the India of today. There is now a Hindu nationalist party in power. Similarly, the Bangladesh of 1971, which was secular, is not the same Bangladesh now. The Hindu nationalist party carries resentment for Muslims in general. Incidentally, Bangladesh happens to fall under that criterion.

Why do people cross the border illegally in the first place?

The 1947 Partition of the subcontinent, particularly Bengal, was carried out in a blatantly arbitrary and inconsiderate manner, the repercussions of which are still felt. The partition divided many families: there are families now on both sides of the border who have relatives on the other side. They have been and will continue to try to visit their relatives; you cannot restrict them with passports, visas or barbed-wire fences. There are many who don’t have passports, or can’t afford to get passports and visas easily. Still, they want to visit

their relatives, or their ancestral homes, just like they have been doing for generations since before Partition.

In addition, people migrate in search of work, a better life, and better livelihood options. People have been doing this since before Partition, and even now after the borders have been armed with barbed wire. This kind of migration should be understood and handled considering the region’s history and complexity, considering push factors and pull factors. It is the states’ responsibility to focus on these factors, instead of taking action against these people.

From what I’ve seen, people living in the border areas, on both sides, are extremely marginalised. In India, the majority of people living in border regions are Muslims and Hindu Dalits—both religiously and socio-economically marginalised communities in the country. On your side of the border, too, there are Hindu Dalits, or Muslims from poor communities. And in both countries, border areas and these communities are not the focus of development.

For a better living, these marginalised people are forced to seek different ways to make a living. On the other hand, as I have said, smuggling is allowed and supported by different parts of the system—local politicians, government figures, and border guards. So, smuggling has become an attainable opportunity for these people. If you can just take some cows across the border, or throw a sack over the fence, there is money. The border guards will allow it, and even the police will guard you. But we have to understand that these people are not the kingpins of cross-border smuggling—they are just carriers.

You’ve commented on one of our reports that these are “systematic killings.” Can you elaborate?

The BSF has firearms, but Indian law doesn’t allow using firearms just because you have them. Still, they are using it against people crossing the border, and nobody’s actually stopping them. Their primary argument for this is that they act in self-defence. More often than not, these stories of self-defence are found to be fabricated. It’s true that in some cases the smugglers do attack the BSF. But in most cases, people who are carrying cows, sugar or gold across the border are not armed. Nevertheless, they are shot at.

On the other hand, our state police, local politicians, and BSF personnel get their share from the smugglers. So, this smuggling is supported by bigger players, but the people who carry the goods are actually victims.

Under criminal law, this migration may be considered a crime, but the fundamental human need to survive transcends such laws. The issue cannot be effectively solved with legislation like the Foreigners’ Act or the Entry Act. Similarly, threats of imprisonment, and use of lethal weapons are inhumane and ineffective. When a state only considers its political stance and doesn’t

prioritise the issues and benefits of its citizens, it enables negative impacts on people.

The justice delivery systems in both countries are still not modern. The British left decades ago, but we have not changed many colonial rules, systems and approaches to justice. The Indian Penal Code and the Police Regulations, Bengal have their origins in colonial rule. Your Police Act, too, has its roots there. We have our independence, but our judiciary system, law enforcement are not free, and we are not free from the colonial hangover.

How is this system affecting people in terms of human rights?

The focus of this conversation is on border killings and inhumane behaviour towards marginalised people in border areas, but people are treated badly in many ways. For instance, look at the prisons—there are many foreign captives in jankhalash cases. Among them, many were supposed to be freed and returned to their country many years ago. Many have been through trial, and the court has released them. But somehow their verification issued by the country of origin has not come yet. Why does it take months, and even years to complete such menial work? Why is it not a priority, and solved in time so that these people do not have to remain in jail even after they have served their sentences, or have been released by the court? This is the result of the judiciary system, government, administration, police, home department, and foreign department all being insensitive and inhumane towards people. They still have that colonial mindset and colonial structure. Even if we have laws that ensure equality and do not allow discrimination towards people, nothing will change until we change this mindset.

There are even international laws that ensure human rights for all. There are different declarations, and statements to ensure human rights. But these are just not implemented. Bangladesh has signed many international treaties which will support these marginalised people and their human rights. However, India has not signed many of them. Without working for all of the people, how can we consider the country truly democratic?

What can we do to improve the situation?

We, like many human rights organisations on both sides of the border, are trying to reach the victims and support them in their legal battles, or getting treatment. We try to collect information and facts from different sources, analyse them and present them to the public and to civil society. We try to advocate for governance reforms in the criminal justice system to make it more humane. We try to work for the comprehensive implementation of what is in the constitution—freedom and equality.

Unfortunately, the governments in both countries consider anyone opposing any of their actions as their enemy. Human rights activists, who demand justice for

the people, are treated as enemies of the state and are thrown in jail. If that is the case, if the governments do not want to change, how can you make any reform? We cannot reform law enforcement, the justice system or the governance system until the government is onboard. Until it shows good intentions, this fight for human rights has to continue.

THE DHAKA TRIBUNE, DHAKA 5-4-2024

Seeking stronger ties with China

It is essential for Bangladesh to approach any investment with caution

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's efforts to seek Chinese support for the development of the southern region of Bangladesh sends the right message in terms of diplomacy and stronger bilateral ties with other nations, particularly our neighbours.

There is no questioning China's impact on our existing megaprojects and the hope is that such investments shall only continue; China's expertise in infrastructure development, coupled with Bangladesh's strategic location, creates a win-win situation for both countries.

During a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, PM Hasina rightfully emphasized the potential for Chinese investment in infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges, and ports in the region. The southern region of Bangladesh, due to its proximity to the Bay of Bengal, has untapped potential to become a hub for trade and connectivity, opening up new avenues for our overall development as a nation.

Bangladesh has been leaning on the merits of diplomacy for some time now, embodying Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur's iconic call to offer "friendship to all and malice towards none" that has become the nation's foreign policy stance. However, it is essential for Bangladesh to approach any investment with caution, ensuring that projects are implemented transparently, sustainably, and in the best interest of the local communities.

Bangladesh is on the cusp of achieving historic milestones. By leveraging opportunities in furthering this relationship effectively, Bangladesh can not only accelerate its journey towards becoming a developed nation, but in the process, aspire towards becoming a key player in regional and global trade.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 5-4-2024

What will happen to migrants abandoned in Malaysia?

Save exploited Bangladeshi workers, take action against those involved

We are alarmed to learn details of the exploitation of around 100 Bangladeshi workers who migrated to Malaysia in pursuit of a better life. They were promised

jobs with a basic salary of 1,500 Malaysian ringgit (Tk 37,500) with Petrazehra Berhad, a Johor Bahru-based company. However, once they reached their destination, having taken out huge loans or sold off properties at home, they found themselves thrust into a nightmarish existence devoid of dignity and hope.

According to a report by this daily, around 300 workers were hired by Petrazehra Berhad in October last year, but none of them were given jobs or granted work permits. With their passports confiscated, the company placed—and essentially trapped—them in a seedy hostel in the Sepang district of Selangor. Crammed into overcrowded rooms, with up to 25 men sharing a single space, these workers are now forced to endure appalling living conditions, deprived of even the most basic necessities. Workers say they received around Tk 5,000 for food over the past few months, with no money left for healthcare or other necessities to survive, much less send back home to pay off their debts.

While 200 workers later managed to find employment elsewhere, or an alternative place to stay, at least a hundred still remain trapped in the rundown hostel. They cannot leave it for fear of arrests or forced deportation. Many of them have fallen sick but cannot seek medical treatment as they do not have passports or work permits. The situation is so dire that one of them, Shafiqul Islam, suffered a stroke and died on February 29.

This is not the first time that we have heard such gory details of workers' sufferings in Malaysia. As per the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), over 400,000 Bangladeshis have gone to Malaysia since late 2022 when the Southeast Asian country reopened the labour market for Bangladesh after four years. Researchers estimate that out of approximately 800,000 Bangladeshis in Malaysia, 100,000-200,000 workers remain jobless, unpaid and in debt. Yet, we have not seen any decisive action from Bangladeshi or Malaysian authorities to identify errant employers and rehabilitate the abandoned migrant workers.

Now that the abuse by Petrazehra Berhad has been documented, the Bangladesh government must urge Malaysian authorities to take swift action against the company. Workers must be paid what they were initially promised in their contracts and compensated for the mental and physical abuse they were subjected to all these months. The imminent closure of the Malaysian market should not get in the way of justice for exploited workers. The recruiting agency that had vouched for Petrazehra Berhad must also be held accountable, so that no other Bangladeshi has to face such horrific treatment in the hands of their employers anywhere in the world.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 3-4-2024

Takeaways from PM's visit to China

Tissa Mihindupura

Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena concluded an official visit to China. He undertook the visit at the invitation of Li Qiang, Premier of the State Council of China. He attended the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2024 from March 25 to 30, 2024.

Some people assumed that China – Sri Lanka relations remained a low key affair and in fact soured a bit over the moratorium on research activities with the involvement of any foreign vessel on Sri Lanka's Exclusive Economic Zone. It is widely perceived an act done targeting the Chinese research vessels seeking to carry out research in the Indian Ocean. It is true that China is disappointed over the incident and expressed its dissatisfaction to the Sri Lankan government.

However, after the Prime Minister's visit, it turned out bilateral relationship is premised on a sound footing despite occasional differences.

Bilateral discussions

The visit is substantial than though since he was accorded the opportunity to meet Chinese President Xi Jinping for bilateral discussions. In Sri Lanka, the Prime Minister is not the Head of State. Still the Chinese Head of State met with the visiting Sri Lankan Prime Minister signifying the importance the two sides attached to each other.

He also met with Zhao Leji, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress.

According to the joint statement issued, in cordial and friendly atmosphere, the two sides had in-depth discussions and reached extensive common understandings on bilateral relations and regional and international issues of mutual interest. In its dealings with the rest of the world, China wants to secure support from different countries to advocate its one – China policy and recognise Taiwan as what it calls inalienable part of China. In the joint statement, Sri Lanka has reiterated its position supportive of China. This is a fundamental requirement for any country seeking healthy ties with China, and there is no exception for Sri Lanka.

As such Sri Lanka announcing its position in the joint statement is nothing new.

However, the joint statement contains numerous other aspects that charter the course of Sino- Lanka ties.

In the current context, vital discussion took place on debt restructuring and China reassured its positive and friendly engagement with the international organisations including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a

successful completion of Sri Lanka's debt restructuring programme.

Sri Lanka expresses appreciation to the Chinese side for the support that helped its financial difficulties, and, in particular, the pioneering step taken by the Chinese financial institution last year to propose a bilateral debts settlement plan and the preliminary agreement reached with Sri Lanka on the settlement of China-related debts on the basis of friendly consultation. The Chinese side expresses its readiness to continue supporting its financial institution in actively consulting with Sri Lanka, maintain friendly communication with other creditors, and play a positive role in the International Monetary Fund, to help Sri Lanka ease its financial difficulties and achieve debt sustainability, the joint statement said.

This assurance is important for Sri Lanka's future since China is the largest bilateral creditor. However, debt restructuring talks are underway with the Paris Club of nations. Separate discussions are underway with China. The other creditor nations insist on equal treatment of debt. As a result, Chinese assurance for cooperation for an even handed approach is important.

Sri Lanka's cooperation with China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a contentious issue because other powers such as India and the United States.

No matter what, it appears that Sri Lanka is trying its best to maintain its non-aligned foreign policy. In Sri Lanka, there are two major BRI projects- Hambantota Port and the Colombo Port City.

Strategic communication

"The two sides agree to keep the momentum of high-level interactions, expand exchanges and cooperation between governments and other stakeholders, strengthen strategic communication, promote high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, and continue to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation in all areas," the joint statement said. The two sides share the view that the peoples of China and Sri Lanka enjoy long-standing friendship, and have engaged in mutual learning, mutual assistance and seeking strength through unity. In the 67 years since the establishment of diplomatic ties, the two countries have strengthened traditional friendship, enhanced political mutual trust, achieved fruitful results in practical cooperation, and engaged in close coordination on regional and international issues, setting a fine example of friendly interactions and mutually beneficial cooperation between countries of different sizes. The two sides agree to carry forward the spirit of independence, self-reliance, solidarity and mutual assistance enshrined in the Agreement on Rice for Rubber, jointly tackle challenges, share opportunities and seek common development, thereby cementing and expanding the China-Sri Lanka strategic cooperative

partnership based on sincere mutual assistance and everlasting friendship to bring greater benefits to the two countries and peoples, according to the statement.

The statement said the two sides agree to keep the momentum of high-level interactions, expand exchanges and cooperation between governments and other stakeholders, strengthen strategic communication, promote high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, and continue to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation in all areas.

In the meantime, the Chinese media reported that Sri Lanka should ensure fair, transparent environment for Chinese companies. The Chinese leaders have sought it from the Prime Minister during their meetings with him. They would have done so probably because Sri Lanka sometimes awards projects to the companies from different countries without calling for tenders. That is a balancing act in the in the midst of geopolitical contestations.

When one country is appeased, another country gets anatomised making it arduous for Sri Lanka to make the tight diplomatic rope. Yet in principle Sri Lanka is fully aligned with China's key approaches in international affairs as obvious in the content of the joint statement that sets the tone for the forward march of bilateral ties.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 7-4-2024

India, Sri Lanka talks on land bridge

By Dinuli Francisco

India's proposal to construct a land bridge linking India and Sri Lanka will be presented to President Ranil Wickremesinghe in the coming week.

A spokesman for the President's Office said that following discussions with Indian representatives, the Government will review the basic concepts of the project.

Senior Adviser to the President and Chief of Staff Sagala Ratnayaka concluded discussions in India recently, where the construction of the land bridge was a focal point among various bilateral matters. Ratnayaka held talks with a delegation of high-ranking officials, including Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra to explore the feasibility and benefits of the proposed project.

Indian Government officials have stressed the advantages that the land bridge could bring, emphasising the potential for enhanced import-export activities between the two nations. The land bridge is expected to strengthen economic ties and facilitate smoother trade operations with reduced transportation costs compared to maritime shipping or air freight.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 2-4-2024

Deputy PM Shrestha says he proposed new corridors to China

Under its 'peripheral diplomacy', Beijing has entrusted Tibet, Sichuan and Chongqing with engaging Nepal.

ANIL GIRI

Kathmandu, Are the stalled Nepal-China ties finally getting some momentum? Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha has some ideas on that score.

Shrestha says he has proposed building Nepal-China economic and development corridors with Chinese officials. The objective, he said, is to boost economic growth, trade, tourism, and connectivity between Nepal and three Chinese provinces that oversee and engage in various bilateral activities.

Shrestha, who returned home from China on Monday after a nine-day official visit at the invitation of his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, said he had positive discussions with Chinese leaders and officials on the development of the corridors with three Chinese provinces—Tibet, Sichuan and Chongqing.

These three provinces have made significant contributions to nurturing relations with Nepal, according to several Nepali politicians who have recently visited China.

Beijing has entrusted these provinces with engaging, promoting and expanding relations with Nepal under China's "peripheral diplomacy." Of late Nepal has seen a series of back-to-back high-level visits from these provinces, and when Nepali leaders visit China, their first destinations are Tibet, Sichuan and Chongqing.

"We had very positive discussions on developing economic and development corridors between Nepal and China," Shrestha said. "The focus of my visit was economic diplomacy. Nepal has been thinking about this new concept [the idea of corridors] after China introduced the Trans Himalayan Multi Dimensional Connectivity Network (THMDCN), which comprises economic and connectivity corridors to be developed under the Belt and Road Initiative."

The corridor starting from the Nepal-Tibet border will reach Chongqing through Sichuan province, Bishnu Pukar Shrestha, Nepali ambassador to China, told the Post over the phone from Beijing.

"If we can develop such a corridor, that would serve as an economic, trade and developmental vehicle between the two countries and open more vistas of cooperation. The concept is in a nascent phase, and it will take some time to develop its blueprint," said ambassador Shrestha.

Deputy Prime Minister Shrestha said a major achievement of his visit is the reciprocal visa waiver for Nepali citizens travelling to China.

"The Chinese are positive about it."

Nepal has been waiving visa fees for Chinese nationals since 2016 and has been looking for similar reciprocal treatment from China.

Although Deputy Prime Minister Shrestha said that China is ready to reopen the 14 traditional border points closed during the Covid pandemic, an official at the foreign ministry, requesting anonymity, said that is unlikely anytime soon.

While four traditional border points have already reopened since 2023, some are encountering difficulties, said officials.

"Reopening the remaining border points will involve technical challenges. But if they are reopened, it will be easier for our citizens living along the Nepal-China border to do business and sustain their livelihoods," said a member of Shrestha's delegation.

During the visit, besides holding delegation-level talks with his Chinese counterpart, Deputy Prime Minister Shrestha also called on the chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Wang Huning; vice minister of the International Department of the CPC Central Committee, Sun Haiyan; secretary of the Chongqing Municipal Party Committee of CPC, Yuan Jiajun; party secretary of CPC Tibet, Wang Junzheng; and Sichuan province governor Huang Qiang, among others.

DPM Shrestha, who is also the vice-chairman of the CPN (Maoist Centre), had an hour-long one-on-one with Wang and other CPC leaders. They discussed Nepal's political situation, among other things, according to a Nepali official who was part of the visit.

The Chinese leaders wanted to know if the government in Kathmandu would be stable after the entry of the CPN-UML in the ruling coalition, according to the official.

During his meeting with Shrestha, Chinese foreign minister Wang repeatedly emphasised the need for political stability, but Deputy Prime Minister Shrestha explained how Nepali political system is different from the Chinese one, the official said.

"In the Chinese system, one party rules from top to bottom and the decisions made by the leadership are implemented uniformly. But Nepali political system is different, and due to the composition of [hung] Parliament, governments change frequently," Shrestha told the Chinese leaders, according to the official.

"We have to face opposition parties too. But we are moving ahead with good planning."

During the visit, the Nepali side proposed elevating the existing foreign secretary-led bilateral mechanism to the foreign minister level in order to discuss various aspects of Nepal-China relations on a regular basis.

Both sides are said to be positive on setting up the joint commission at the foreign minister level, similar to one Nepal has had with India for decades.

“But, while the Nepali side proposed the mechanism, the Chinese side has yet to officially respond,” the official said.

The two sides also discussed finalising the long-due implementation plan for the Belt and Road Initiative. The draft of the plan was first proposed by the Chinese side in late 2019 and both sides have exchanged several comments and amendments.

“One of the main objectives of the visit was to finalise the BRI implementation plan, but that could not happen. We had already agreed on signing the BRI implementation plan during the prime minister’s China visit last September,” said Shrestha. “We revisited the issue.”

“There is also a discussion about whether to take loans or grants under the BRI. Naturally our priority is grants, not loans. Building projects whether with loan or grant comes only in the third stage [following Nepal’s selection of projects and then sharing of their details with China]. So we have to select projects carefully,” Deputy Prime Minister Shrestha told reporters upon landing at the Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu.

Ambassador Shrestha said Nepal will discuss the project financing modality only after signing the BRI implementation plan.

“Once we give final touches to the BRI implementation plan, we will proceed to the signing stage. It will take some time, probably another two-three months,” ambassador Shrestha said.

“We have proposed different modalities for the implementation plan including grant and concessional loans. But we are not in a position to accept commercial and costly loans,” added the ambassador.

According to a commentary published on China.com, a Chinese news portal, and widely shared in WeChat, a popular Chinese app, the goal of Shrestha’s trip was to persuade China to convert the loan given to Nepal to build the Pokhara International Airport into a grant.

During his meeting with the Chinese leader, Shrestha said that if China does not transform the Pokhara airport loan into a grant, then Nepal will not be able to entertain high-interest loans from China in the future, according to the commentary.

The commentary also mentions the ongoing investigation by the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority into the Pokhara International Airport construction.

The Chinese commentary has termed Shrestha’s request to convert the loan into grant as ‘unreasonable’.

“Now some people in Nepal are claiming that if China does not agree, they will not consider subsequent high-interest loans. In fact, they are threatening us. If the loans are not converted into grants, Nepal may not continue to cooperate with China on the basis of the Belt and Road Initiative. And why is Nepal so bent on

challenging China? Then we have to mention India. You know, when it learned that Nepal decided to strengthen cooperation with China, India put pressure on Nepal many times,” stated the commentary in Mandarin.

The commentary further went to say that with the outbreak of the “India Quit” movement in Bangladesh and the Maldives’ demand for India to withdraw its troops, and the fact that Nepal’s pro-Indian Nepali Congress Party was kicked out of the Cabinet not long ago, the People’s Liberation Army military delegation also visited the Maldives and Nepal from the beginning to the middle of this month.

“This series of events has intensified the uneasiness of the Modi government, fearing that another South Asian country will seek to escape India’s control. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that India once again coerced and induced Nepal to achieve the purpose of getting them to withdraw from the Belt and Road Initiative and stay away from China,” stated the commentary. “Nepal used the BRI as a bargaining chip to blackmail us into waiving loans.”

“Perhaps it was because it could not withstand the Modi government’s intrusion and finally chose to compromise,” it added.

“At the same time, there is another possibility, that is Nepal feels that China and India are trying hard to compete for influence in South Asia... But once we agree on Nepal’s request, other countries will inevitably follow suit, and won’t we be roasted on the fire? Therefore, no matter what motivations Nepal has for wanting to default on China, we refuse to be taken advantage of,” writes the Chinese news site in its commentary on Shrestha’s visit.

During the visit, China committed to an enhanced level of cooperation in different sectors, said a press note issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after the visit. It said the two sides also agreed to expedite the implementation of the past accords and will resume regular meetings of the bilateral mechanisms.

“China is also ready to provide its pasture areas to the Nepali farmers as per the agreement on trans-frontier pasturing by border inhabitants signed in 2012 and agreed for electrification in some rural areas of Nepal-China border. Both sides are also positive to conduct direct bus service between Kathmandu and Lhasa. We have also requested to facilitate the export of cooked buffalo meat, haylage grass, plant-based medicinal products, vegetable fruits and other Nepali products,” reads the press note.

Deputy Prime Minister Shrestha, during his meeting with Chinese leaders and officials, also requested China to set up a multi-functional lab on the Nepal-China border; sought the use of more Chinese capital and technology in Nepal’s agriculture sector; proposed more flights to Kathmandu and Pokhara from different

Chinese cities; and asked for greater participation of Chinese investors including high-level Chinese leadership at Nepal's third investment summit to be held on April 28 and 29 in Kathmandu, according to the press note.

The two sides are ready to work to expand cross-border railway as well as road and air connectivity, and expand the electricity grid so that connectivity between Nepal and China will increase, the note further said. The two countries have also agreed to come up with specific projects in areas like agriculture, tourism, hydropower and infrastructure.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 7-4-2024

Nepal proposes mutual customs assistance with India

Agreements will allow for exchange of information, intelligence, and documents, ultimately helping the countries prevent growing customs offences.

Post Report

KATHMANDU, Nepal has proposed a customs mutual assistance arrangement with India, the largest trading partner, to simplify trade-related activities between the two countries.

The agreements will allow for the exchange of information, intelligence, and documents, ultimately assisting the countries in the prevention and investigation of customs offences.

"We have proposed the arrangement. Once the agreement is signed between the countries, it will significantly reduce leakages," said Ram Prasad Ghimire, revenue secretary of the Ministry of Finance.

He was addressing a panel discussion entitled 'Voice of Birgunj', organised by the Kantipur Media Group on Saturday, in Birgunj.

According to him, a separate integrated revenue policy will be prepared for the upcoming fiscal year. "There might be some weakness in revenue policy which we believe has caused an economic slowdown. If there is something like that, it can be reviewed."

Traders in Birgunj said that revenue leakage has thrived due to growing malpractices.

Anil Agrawal, president of the Birgunj Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said Nepal's customs imposes a 50 percent penalty if the invoice bill does not match the customs evaluation book.

"To dodge the 50 percent penalty, entrepreneurs and traders are submitting wrong invoices," said Agrawal, speaking at the third session of the discussion entitled 'Stable Policy to Uplift the Economy.'

"Despite submitting real invoices issued by India, the customs does not approve it. It evaluates under the book valuation of its own," Agrawal said. "The customs rules

change frequently, on a monthly basis. Corruption has also increased," he said.

Nepal has banned the import of dried peas. "As India imports dried peas on zero duty, it is then reexported to Nepal," Agrawal said.

"Why would the government impose a ban on edible goods," he asked. The government needs to bring a policy that encourages trade through legal channels."

Responding to Agrawal, Ghimire said that the government has been coordinating with its different bodies and the private sector to ease customs-related difficulties.

Kul Man Ghising, managing director of Nepal Electricity Authority, speaking in the first session titled 'Industry and Trade, Where is the Infrastructure', said that the authority has prepared a master plan for the industrial corridor in nearly a dozen cities on electricity demand projections.

"Birgunj and Hetauda are among the clusters with a demand for more than 3,000 MW electricity by 2050. We have started building 400 kV and 200 kV power transmission infrastructure that will have higher capacities to ensure reliable power supply in the future," Ghising said.

"The construction work has started. A sub-station is under construction in Parsauni for the same purpose," Ghising said. "To meet the electricity demand in Birgunj, we have invested Rs20 billion in infrastructure that includes transmission lines, substation and distribution networks," he said. It would take around 3-4 years to complete the projects.

Agrawal said there is a need to boost the confidence of entrepreneurs and industrialists to do business and trade. Currently, the private sector has lost confidence and factories are shutting down one after another.

"The industries that are operating are also running below 20-25 percent capacity. There is a massive lay-off. Some factories have completely shut down and thrown many people out of jobs," Agrawal said.

Lawmaker Anil Rungta, who is also an industrialist, speaking at the first session of the event, said, "Until there is a stable government and policy, it is useless to expect the industry sector to improve."

"The policy changes with the change in government. The industrial and economic policies need to be stable for at least 5 to 10 years."

Rungta said that the industries in Birgunj are operating at 20 percent capacity due to the lack of electricity. "Due to an unscientific tax system in food industries, they are unable to operate in a full-fledged manner."

Maha Prasad Adhikari, the governor of Nepal Rastra Bank, speaking in the third session, said that in the past few years, the demand has declined overall, resulting in a decline in credit demand as well.

“The capacity utilisation of large industries has declined to 35–40 percent. When the capacity utilisation declines by 35–40 percent, the demand for credit falls by 60 percent,” Adhikari said. “When the demand is low in the market, the money remains in banks,” he said.

“We can look at this situation positively also. It means that whenever the state needs money to spend or the private sector needs it in the future, we have ample liquidity,” Adhikari said.

“The economy is dependent on remittances, bank’s liquidity increases if remittances come, revenue collection increases if the import increases,” Adhikari said.

“So it is important to focus on the internal economy and production. Unless we are able to strengthen our external sector by exporting goods, the cycle of liquidity crunch and liquidity excess will continue,” Adhikari said. Industrialists from Birgunj lamented that the working capital guidelines have created a negative business environment.

In response, Adhikari said the working capital guidelines were introduced so that credit does not get misutilised and does not hurt industry entrepreneurs if they do not use loans against the stated purpose.

Damodar Bhandari, the minister for industry, commerce and supplies, said the government was amending laws to encourage industrial development and to draw foreign direct investment.

In the first session, lawmaker Pradeep Yadav asked why the government does not make a development package for Birgunj. “Birgunj is always ignored despite being the country’s main trade gateway,” said Yadav. Birgunj has not been announced as an industrial city, he said.

Responding to Yadav, Bhandari said that the federal government was ready to declare Birgunj an industrial city.

In terms of electricity development, according to Ghising, they have opened bids to produce 200 MW of solar energy in Birgunj, among the plan to produce 2,200 MW of solar energy nationwide. The energy-mix policy would assure electricity during the dry season when hydro capacity drops.

Ghising also requested the industry entrepreneurs of Birgunj not to be discouraged by the current electricity deficit in industrial areas as it was temporary. The electricity generation is increasing and next year 600 MW energy will be added to the national grid, he said.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 15-4-2024

Iran foreign ministry issues statement on retaliatory attacks against Israel

TEHRAN- The Iranian foreign ministry issued a statement on Saturday, hailing the “Truthful Promise” retaliatory operation, launched by the Islamic

Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), against the Israeli regime.

“On 14 April 2024, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s armed forces have carried out a series of military strikes on Israeli’s military bases in response to, and in exercise of its inherent right of self-defense as recognized under Article 51 of the Charter, against Israel’s recurring military aggressions, resulting in the martyrdom of the Iranian military advisors present in Syria at the invitation of the Syrian government, in particular the 1 April armed attack against diplomatic premises of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Damascus,” it noted.

The statement also said, “The Islamic Republic of Iran reaffirms its commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and international law, while reiterating its determination to forcefully defend its sovereignty, territorial integrity and national interests against any unlawful use of force and aggressions.”

“The Islamic Republic of Iran’s resort to defensive measures in exercise of its right of self-defense demonstrates Iran’s responsible approach toward regional and international peace and security at a time when the occupying apartheid regime’s pattern of relentless genocidal campaign against Palestinian people is accompanied with repeated military aggressions against neighboring States and fanning the flames across the region and beyond.”

The ministry went on to add, “The Islamic Republic of Iran would not hesitate to take further necessary defensive measures to protect its legitimate interests against any act of military aggression or unlawful use of force.”

Iran launched retaliatory attacks against the occupied territories on Saturday night, after the Israeli regime struck the country’s embassy in Damascus on April 1, killing 7 high-ranking military officials.

The overnight escalation came more than six months into Israel’s devastating war on the Gaza Strip, which has killed more than 33,000 Palestinians and pushed the besieged territory to the brink of famine.

Israeli reports said Iran has already fired three waves of drones at Israeli positions, as well as a number of cruise missiles. Footage captured by citizens in Iraq, suggests Iran’s famous Shahed-136 drones are among the UAVs launched at the occupied territories.

With the missiles and drone attack, Iran’s mission to the United Nations said it now deemed the matter “concluded” and warned Israel of a “considerably more severe” response should the “Israeli regime make another mistake”.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 15-4-2024

Tehran says much harsher response awaits Israel if it attacks Iran

TEHRAN- Iran's Armed Forces Chief of Staff, alongside the Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), have issued a stern caution to Israel, emphasizing the repercussions of any potential miscalculation concerning Iran.

Major General Mohammad Bagheri, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, has declared that Tehran achieved all its targets and that the retaliatory operation against Israel has concluded.

Iran launched retaliatory attacks against the occupied territories on Saturday, after the Israeli regime struck the country's embassy in Damascus on April 1, killing 7 high-ranking military officials.

During a televised interview on Sunday, General Bagheri asserted, "We've achieved all our objectives," signaling the completion of the operation from the Iranian perspective. He emphasized that while there are no immediate plans for further action, any provocation by the Zionist regime would elicit a robust response.

According to reports from Tasnim News Agency, Bagheri announced the successful conclusion of Operation Truthful Promise, highlighting the fulfillment of all its objectives.

General Bagheri elaborated on the strategic significance of the operation, condemning the intolerable actions of the Zionist regime, particularly the targeting of the Iranian consulate in Damascus.

He underscored the widespread condemnation of the regime's actions and stressed the necessity of a response, which was executed with support from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and other branches of the Iranian armed forces.

Providing further insight into the operation, Bagheri outlined the targeting of a major intelligence center and an airbase involved in the attack on the Iranian consulate, both sustaining significant damage.

"Utilizing drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles with precision tactics, the operation successfully penetrated the regime's defenses," noted the Iranian general.

Addressing the involvement of the United States, Bagheri asserted that any collaboration with Zionist provocations would be met with a robust response. He highlighted U.S. efforts to neutralize the operation in Iraq and Jordan but emphasized their failure and the achievement of the operation's goals.

"This operation has accomplished its objectives, and there is no intention to continue it," Bagheri stated. However, he warned, "If the Zionist regime takes action against Iran's soil or in Iranian centers in Syria or elsewhere, our next operation will be even more significant."

Bagheri clarified that while the operation was primarily carried out by the IRGC, other branches of the Iranian armed forces stand ready to act if necessary. He added, "We had the capability to conduct an operation ten times larger, but we aimed to deliver a proportional punishment."

Much harsher response awaits Israel if it attacks Iran: IRGC chief

The chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) has warned the Israeli regime that Iran's reaction will be "certainly much harsher" if the regime responds to Iran's retaliatory operation.

"The Zionist regime must stop its past behavior and learn from this [attack]. If the Zionist regime shows any response, our reaction will certainly be much harsher based on this new experience we have gained from their capabilities," Major General Hossein Salami said on Sunday.

"From now on, if the Zionist regime attacks our interests, assets, figures, and citizens at any point, it will face counterattack from within the Islamic Republic of Iran," he added.

On Saturday night, the IRGC launched extensive missile and drone strikes against the occupied territories in response to Israel's deadly attack on the Iranian diplomatic premises in Syria early this month that killed seven members of its armed forces including two generals.

Salami highlighted that Iran could carry out an operation on a larger scale but the attack "was limited" to the military bases of the Zionist regime, from the Golan Heights to the Negev desert, that were used in the terrorist attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus.

According to Salami, the operation was "more successful than expected."

"So far, we have not collected all the data relating to the strikes [against Israeli targets], but detailed, documented reports from the scene show that the operation was more successful than we expected," he said.

The IRGC general explained that the operation was "unknown" and "unclear", but had "opened a new chapter" for Iran in the fight against the Israeli regime.

He noted that Israel has a multilayered air-defense system which includes the Arrow, designed to intercept long-range missiles, David's Sling, meant to intercept medium-range missiles, and Patriot, which is used to shoot down aircraft, such as drones.

Israel's defense system was also coping with incoming rocket, drone and missile attacks from Iran with assistance from the US, he added.

"The deep and multilayered air defense with the assistance from the US was stretching from Iraqi air space to Jordan and even parts of Syria and Palestine.

"Israel was using its F-15, F-16, and state-of-the-art F-35 fighter jets, Gulfstream jets as well as aerial refueling

aircraft [...] they were all deployed to defend Israel's positions," he added.

Penetrating these systems was "extremely difficult", according to Salami.

Moreover, Israel and U.S. electronic warfare could have represented a landmark in deciding the fate of the war crafts, so the operation took tactical ingenuity to render the enemy's defense systems ineffective, Salami added.

"Dozens of ballistic and cruise missiles manage to break into deep layers of Israel's seemingly safe air defense system, impact the aerial coalition between the U.S., France and Israel and reach the designated targets," he said.

Iran's retaliatory missile and drone strikes on Israel were launched after two weeks of strategic patience and meticulous planning and execution.

The operation included at least four waves of drone attacks. It is estimated that a total of 400 to 500 drones were launched.

The retaliatory military operation also included the launch of a series of cruise and ballistic missiles, which were reportedly accompanied by simultaneous drone and missile strikes by the Axis of Resistance groups from Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon.

On Sunday morning, the chief of staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, said Iran has concluded its retaliatory strikes on the occupied territories.

Bgheri downplayed the extent of the operation compared to what Iran is capable of, saying that it was merely a punishment and the country's response to any further military action by the Israeli regime "will be much greater."

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 3-4-2024

U.S. Iran envoy visits Azerbaijan amid Tehran-Baku thaw

TEHRAN – U.S. Deputy Special Envoy for Iran Abram Paley paid a surprise visit to the Republic of Azerbaijan, holding meeting with several officials ahead of an anticipated restoration of Tehran-Baku diplomatic relations.

Paley's visit to the capital Baku was part of a regional tour that included Georgia and Armenia as well. "Constructive trip to the South Caucasus, where I met with senior officials and the private sector to discuss the Iranian regime, sanctions enforcement, and ongoing efforts to address the regime's destabilizing behavior.

The U.S. aims to work with our partners to advance a positive vision for the region," Paley said on X.

In Baku, the U.S. of official met with Hikmet Hajiyev, an assistant to the Azerbaijani president, Deputy Foreign Minister Samir Sharifov, Azerbaijani

Ambassador to Iran Ali Alizada, and Israeli Ambassador to Azerbaijan George Deek.

The visit to Azerbaijan by the U.S. deputy envoy for Iran comes at a time when Tehran and Baku are nearing an agreement on restoring diplomatic relations, which were severed in early 2023 following an attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 13-4-2024

Dominating powers seeking insecurity between Iran, Pakistan: Raisi

TEHRAN- Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, in a recent telephone conversation with his Pakistani counterpart, highlighted the discord fostered by "dominating powers" between Tehran and Islamabad. In their discussion on Thursday, President Raisi lauded the resilience of Islamic youth against various threats, including from takfiri groups like Daesh, underscoring the importance of cooperation in combating terrorism to thwart the agenda of adversaries and bolster friendship between Tehran and Islamabad.

Raisi extended Eid al-Fitr greetings to Pakistan, acknowledging the re-election of President Asif Ali Zardari and emphasizing the deep-rooted historical ties between the two nations, founded on shared religious, cultural, and neighborhood bonds.

He expressed optimism for enhanced bilateral relations to serve the interests of both countries, pointing to untapped potential in cultural, trade, and energy sectors.

The Iranian president warned against the machinations of "domineering powers," who seek to sow division between Iran and Pakistan, urging concerted efforts to prevent their nefarious intentions and strengthen ties between the two Islamic nations.

Touching upon the ongoing atrocities in Gaza by the Zionist regime, Raisi lamented the plight of the Palestinian people and called for collective action from freedom-seeking and independent nations to pressure the aggressor and halt the bloodshed.

President Zardari, for his part, reciprocated Eid al-Fitr greetings to Iran and condemned the recent attack on the Iranian embassy's consular section in Damascus by the Zionist regime.

Expressing eagerness to enhance relations, Zardari highlighted the cultural and civilizational affinities between Iran and Pakistan as fertile ground for expanding cooperation across various domains. Both leaders echoed concerns over regional security threats and reiterated their commitment to joint efforts in combating terrorism while preserving the integrity of their friendly relations. Zardari also emphasized the imperative for Muslim and independent countries to unite against the Zionist regime's crimes in Gaza.

In the end, Zardari extended a formal invitation for President Raisi to visit Pakistan, expressing anticipation

for the visit in the near future. The two neighboring countries witnessed an escalation of cross-border tensions over Iran's counter-terrorism operations. On January 16, Iran launched simultaneous drone and missile attacks on two bases of Jaish ul-Adl, a terror outfit that was formed in 2012 and has conducted several attacks on Iranian soil in recent years.

The group claimed responsibility for an attack in December 2023 on a police station in the southeastern city of Rask that killed at least 11 Iranian police officers.

On January 10, another attack by the group on a police station in the city killed one officer.

Pakistan carried out strikes on January 17 against, what it called were, bases of the separatist Baloch Liberation Front and Baloch Liberation Army in regions close to Iran's border which Tehran slammed as unbalanced.

The two countries fully restored ties in the next weeks as ambassadors resumed duties in late January.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 6-4-2024

Evidence links Indian agents to killings of Pakistanis on Pak soil: FO

These cases have exposed the increasing sophistication and brazenness of Indian-sponsored terrorist acts inside Pakistan

By Mariana Baabar

ISLAMABAD: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Friday said that Pakistan had credible evidence linking Indian agents to extra-territorial and extra-judicial killings of two Pakistani nationals on Pakistani soil.

These cases have exposed the increasing sophistication and brazenness of Indian-sponsored terrorist acts inside Pakistan, with striking similarities with the pattern observed in other countries, including Canada and the United States.

"India's assassination of Pakistani nationals on Pakistani soil is a clear violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and a breach of the UN Charter. It is critical to bring to justice the perpetrators, facilitators, financiers and sponsors of these extra-judicial and extra-territorial killings," the ministry said.

The Indian network of extra-judicial and extra-territorial killings, it added, is now a global phenomenon that needs coordinated international response. India must be held accountable internationally for its blatant violation of international law.

The Foreign Office made reference to the statements which it had issued a few months ago when it was asked on Friday to respond to The Guardian, which in a report published on Thursday, said that the Indian government assassinated individuals in Pakistan as part of a wider strategy to eliminate terrorists living on foreign soil.

The report cited intelligence officials from both countries, as well as documents shared by Pakistani investigators, saying they "shed new light on how India's foreign intelligence agency allegedly began to carry out assassinations abroad as part of an emboldened approach to national security after 2019".

Initially the Foreign Office said it was not ready to comment on media reports but pointed to a detailed statement that the foreign secretary had made a few months ago which would to a great extent address the accusations against India as carried by 'The Guardian'.

Taken aback by revelations in The Guardian newspaper that the Indian government had assassinated individuals inside Pakistan, New Delhi responded in a contradictory manner with the minister of defence at odds with the ministry of external affairs.

When Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh was asked on television about the accusations by 'The Guardian', he confirmed and said as Prime Minister Modi had asserted "India has shown that it will go inside their house (Pakistan) and kill them".

Meanwhile, India's ministry of external affairs denied the claims, reiterating an earlier statement that they were "false and malicious anti-India propaganda".

The ministry emphasised a previous denial made by India's foreign minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, that targeted killings in other countries were "not the government of India's policy".

The Foreign Office referred to the statement by Foreign Secretary Syrus Sajjad Qazi in which he pointed to the sophisticated and sinister Indian campaign of extra-territorial and extra-judicial killings inside Pakistan.

"We have credible evidence of links between Indian agents and assassination of two Pakistani nationals on Pakistani soil.

These were killings-for-hire cases involving a sophisticated international setup spread over multiple jurisdictions. Indian agents used technology and safe havens on foreign soil to commit assassinations in Pakistan. They recruited, financed and supported criminals, terrorists and unsuspecting civilians to play defined roles in these assassinations", the foreign secretary had claimed.

He had said that the Indian media and social media accounts immediately claimed and glorified these killings as successful retribution against "enemies" of India and projected their capacity to carry out these illegal acts. Potential assassins were recruited, using social media, talent spotters and fake Daesh accounts.

"There was complete compartmentalisation of the various components of the operation with employment of teams of financiers, locators, and assassins. Elaborate exit plans were developed to obscure all potential tracks. At this stage, we are sharing information on two cases. A few other similar cases are under investigation and will be revealed in due course," he had added.

First case was that of the assassination of Shahid Latif. On October 11, 2023, a group of criminals assassinated Shahid Latif outside a mosque in the city of Sialkot. A detailed investigation revealed that an Indian agent, Yogesh Kumar, based in a third country orchestrated the assassination through criminals and terrorists.

Yogesh Kumar recruited Muhammad Umair, a labourer in that third country, to act as a contact with local criminals in Pakistan to trace and assassinate Shahid Latif. The recruited local criminals were able to locate and trace Shahid Latif. However, the killers-for-hire were unable to carry out the execution.

After some failed attempts, Umair was personally sent to Pakistan to carry out the assassination. Umair organised a team of five target killers which after first failed attempt on October 9, 2023, succeeded in assassinating Shahid Latif on October 11.

Based on confessional statements and technical evidence, law enforcement authorities quickly apprehended the target killers, including Umair, who was trying to flee the country on October 12. All those involved in reconnaissance and killing had been apprehended and are being tried in a court of law. "We have evidence of transactions made in the process linking the entire chain to Indian agent Yogesh Kumar," he had said.

Second case is that of the assassination of Muhammad Riaz. Another Indian agent was involved in killing of another Pakistani national Riaz, who was assassinated during Fajr prayer, in a mosque in Rawalakot on September 8, 2023. Law enforcement agencies tracked the killer Muhammad Abdullah Ali and apprehended him on September 15 while boarding a flight at Jinnah International Airport, Karachi.

Interrogation revealed that Abdullah Ali was recruited and guided by Indian agents Ashok Kumar Anand and Yogesh Kumar. Indian agents utilised social media app Telegram to recruit Abdullah Ali, who was asked to locate Riaz.

Abdullah Ali received payments through middlemen based in a third country. He was also provided with weapons and ammunition. After a failed attempt on September 7, Abdullah Ali succeeded in killing Riaz on September 8, 2023.

The law enforcement authorities apprehended Abdullah Ali and his supporters and facilitators from various cities of Pakistan. The case is being tried in a court of law. Based on confessional statements of Abdullah Ali and technical evidence, the investigators quickly identified the facilitators in Pakistan as well as in third countries.

"We have documentary, financial and forensic evidence of the involvement of the two Indian agents, who masterminded these assassinations. We are releasing the passport details of Yogesh Kumar and Ashok Kumar. We have also reached out to the governments of

relevant third countries. And as I said earlier, there are a few other cases of similar gravity at various stages of investigation", the foreign secretary had said.

The conclusions one is forced to draw from these developments are as follows:-

These cases reveal growing sophistication and brazenness of Indian sponsored terrorist acts inside Pakistan.

They fit the pattern of similar cases which have come to light in other countries, including Canada and the United States. Clearly the Indian network of extra-judicial and extra-territorial killings has become a global phenomenon.

Pakistan has remained a target of extra-judicial killings for some time now. We are now witnessing an increased sophistication in these operations as revealed in these two cases.

It is critical to bring to justice the killers, their facilitators and financers involved in these assassinations. Indian agents need to face justice for its extra-judicial and extra-territorial killings in Pakistan and other countries.

India's assassination of Pakistan nationals on Pakistani soil is violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and a breach of the UN Charter. This violation of Pakistan sovereignty by India is completely unacceptable.

The foreign secretary had demanded that India must be held accountable internationally for its blatant violation of international law.

"Pakistan remains committed to protecting its people and securing its sovereignty. Protection of Pakistanis and any foreign national on Pakistani soil is a high priority for the Government of Pakistan.

"India's reckless and irresponsible act calls into question India's reliability as a credible international player and its claims for enhanced global responsibilities," Syrus had pointed out.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 1-4-2024

Shehbaz responds to Biden's letter: Pakistan attaches high importance to its ties with US: PM

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif Sunday reaffirmed the resolve to work for social uplift and integration of all minorities in Pakistan

APP

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has said Pakistan attaches high importance to its ties with the US.

Responding to a letter of President Joe Biden, he said Pakistan desired to work with the US for achievement of shared goals of global peace and stability, and regional progress and prosperity. He said it was welcoming that both countries had been working

together on various significant initiatives in energy, climate change, agriculture, health and education sectors.

“The cooperation between the two countries on energy sector and Green Alliance framework was welcoming,” PM Office Media Wing quoted the prime minister as saying in a press release issued on Sunday.

Earlier, the US president had addressed a letter to the prime minister in which he extended felicitation to the new government.

President Biden had emphasised the “enduring partnership” between the US and Pakistan.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif Sunday reaffirmed the resolve to work for social uplift and integration of all minorities in Pakistan.

“I extend my heartfelt greetings to the Christian community of Pakistan and around the world, on the occasion of Easter,” he said in a message. The PM said much more than festivity and celebration, Easter was an occasion to reinforce and reflect on the values of love, tolerance and forgiveness as espoused by Prophet Isa (AS) and was a reminder to emulate these in their daily lives to bring harmony and peace in today’s strife and conflict-ridden world.

On this auspicious occasion, the prime minister also lauded the immense contributions of the Christian community to struggle for the creation of Pakistan and its socioeconomic development and firmly believed that they would continue to play their proactive role in progress and stability of Pakistan.

“While we celebrate diversity of faiths as a source of strength and enrichment in our nation, let us join hands towards building a society that is tolerant and cohesive and together defeat the forces of discord that are trying to cause harm to the fabric of our society,” the PM Office Media Wing quoted the prime minister as saying. He also wished the Christian community a happy and peaceful Easter.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 8-4-2024

Shehbaz, MBS hold one-on-one meeting, resolve to boost ties

The premier performed Umrah soon after arriving in Makkah

By AG APP & Staff Correspondent

MAKKAH/ISLAMABAD: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) Sunday especially invited Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and his delegation to an Iftar at Al-Safa Palace here. Shehbaz landed in Saudi Arabia on Saturday on a three-day visit from April 6 to 8.

The premier performed Umrah soon after arriving in Makkah.

Saudi Ambassador to Pakistan Nawaf Bin Saeed Al-Malkiy and high-level officials received the prime minister at the Makkah railway station.

“Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman hosts an Iftar at Al-Safa Palace in Makkah, attended by the Prime Minister of Pakistan and the Crown Prince of Bahrain, where they all broke their fast together,” reported Saudi Gazette.

A statement issued by the PM Office said that the crown prince had extended a special invitation to PM Shehbaz-led delegation for Iftar.

Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz and members of the federal cabinet were also invited to the Iftar, as per the statement.

Shehbaz is accompanied by federal ministers Ishaq Dar, Khawaja Muhammad Asif, Muhammad Aurangzeb, Abdul Aleem Khan, Attaullah Tarar and Ahad Khan Cheema. After the Iftar, a one-on-one meeting was held between the prime minister and MBS.

Shehbaz conveyed prayers and best wishes for the health and well-being of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques His Majesty King Salman bin Abdulaziz.

He expressed gratitude for the warm welcome accorded to him and his delegation by the Saudi authorities.

Both the leaders appreciated the upward trajectory of longstanding fraternal relations. The two leaders reaffirmed common resolve to further strengthen the bilateral ties. A day earlier, the premier also offered Isha prayers and nawafil at Masjid-e-Nabwi along with Maryam Nawaz and paid respects at Roza-e-Rasool (PBUH).

During the premier’s visit, multiple development projects would be finalised, whereas bilateral cooperation in several sectors, including agriculture, continues between the two countries, said the sources.

They said Saudi Arabia was expected to invest \$1 billion in the Reko Diq project.

Pakistan and KSA have longstanding fraternal relations rooted in religious and cultural affinity.

The people of Pakistan have the deepest respect and regard for the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, read the Foreign Office statement.

“The leadership of both countries is committed to advancing the fraternal ties and mutually rewarding economic and investment relations.”

Meanwhile, the prime minister has constituted a high-level committee to review climate change governance and mechanisms to access climate funds and nominated Coordinator to the PM on Climate Change Romina Khursheed Alam and Executive Director Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) Dr Abid Sulehri as its members along with other senior members.

Romina has issued a detailed notification explaining the context, mandate, terms of reference (TORs) and list of the committee members.

The committee will be chaired by the deputy chairman Planning Commission comprising government officials, parliamentarians, representatives from the civil society and environment NGOs, private sector, research institutes and expert/advisors with knowledge on specific topics.

The members are Deputy Chairman Planning Commission Mohammad Jehanzeb Khan (chair), Coordinator to the PM on Climate Change Romina Khursheed Alam, Senator Ayesha Raza Farooq, MNA Bilal Kiyani, Executive Director SDPI Dr Abid Sulehri, Kashmala Kakakhel, Rizwan Mehboob, Ali Tauqir Sheikh, Ahsan Kamran, Nadia Rehman, Member CC PC, secretary MoCC&EC (Secretary of the Committee), secretary Ministry of Commerce, secretary MoPDSI and secretary Ministry of EA and additional secretary (EF) Ministry of Finance.

The committee will suggest approach that involves mainstreaming climate considerations across all government organizations and operations, as well as integrating them into the development agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

It includes evaluating the effectiveness of existing and proposed institutional mechanisms such as the National Climate Change Council, SIFC, proposed Climate Change Authority, Climate Change Fund, National Disaster Risk Management Fund and coordination with key ministries.

Additionally, there is a need to review institutional mechanisms and policies to mobilize climate finance, including climate funds and innovative financial instruments.

The appraisal of institutional mechanisms and policies to mobilize carbon finance is also crucial. Furthermore, assessing institutional mechanisms and policies to attract private capital from various sources such as development finance institutions (DFIs), pension funds, insurance companies, commercial banks, venture capital and private sector firms is essential.

Examining institutional mechanisms and policies to enhance engagement with Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) to reduce the cost of finance and leverage private sector investment through grants, guarantees and concessional climate funds will also be recommended by the committee. The committee will make recommendations to strengthen climate governance, access climate and carbon finance and mobilize the private sector to drive decarbonization of industry, integrate into green value chains and boost exports in alignment with evolving international regulatory mechanisms such as carbon border adjustments.

In a message on the World Health Day observed on Sunday, Shehbaz renewed the commitment of the Government of Pakistan to provide and ensure health facilities for the entire population.

“Towards our destination of a healthier nation, I once again reiterate the commitment to transform Pakistan’s healthcare sector at all levels that will ensure that each and every Pakistani has access to quality healthcare,” the prime minister said.

In order to ensure health for all and as promised to the nation in the PMLN manifesto, the prime minister said their focus would remain on improving primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare, medical education, preventive healthcare and improved governance.

“We will partner and encourage provincial governments to expand and upgrade health facilities, launch mobile health clinics for enhanced access, re-energize immunization and improve mental health services,” PM Office Media Wing, in a press release, quoted the prime minister as saying.

The prime minister said that the establishment and operationalization of Medical City, establishment of Cancer Care Hospital and Pakistan Kidney & Liver Institute facilities in each province remained their key priority.

“We take pride in having launched the Health Card during PMLN’s 2013-18 tenure. We remain committed to universal health coverage and universal health insurance for our population, particularly providing free-of-cost healthcare services to low and middle-income families,” he added. On the World Health Day, the prime minister also applauded the services of health professionals, paramedical staff, nurses and other health workers who selflessly worked day and night to provide health services to the nation.

Meanwhile, the prime minister Sunday expressed grief over the death of former Punjab chief secretary and bureaucrat Javed Mehmood and prayed for elevation of ranks of the deceased in Jannah and condoled with the bereaved family.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 11-4-2024

Modi's remarks on China-India relations are thought-provoking

By Global Times

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "rare" direct statement on China-India ties has been attracting attention. In an exclusive interview with US magazine Newsweek, he stated that for India, the relationship with China is important and significant; India and China "need to urgently address the prolonged situation on our borders so that the abnormality in our bilateral interactions can be put behind us." He said that stable and peaceful relations between India and China are

important for not just the two countries but the entire region and world, adding that "I hope and believe that through positive and constructive bilateral engagement at the diplomatic and military levels, we will be able to restore and sustain peace and tranquility in our borders." Reuters interpreted the remarks as "an apparent softening of tone" on China-Indian bilateral issues.

On the Indian side, particularly among officials responsible for diplomacy and the military, occasional comments have been made on China-Indian relations and border issues over the years, sometimes soft, sometimes tough. However, Modi's direct statement, especially his clear position, is quite rare and carefully timed, hence receiving exceptional attention from the public opinion.

The last time his remarks were highly anticipated was when Modi emphasized that peace on India's border with China is essential for normal relations, and that India was committed to protecting its sovereignty and dignity, while attending the Group of Seven (G7) summit in Hiroshima, Japan, last year, which clearly catered to the Western audience who were wishing to see China-India row. This time, his remarks come after the intensification of China-India border tensions due to US' biased stance and before the upcoming elections in India, and are thus more worthy of consideration.

Modi's interview has sent out quite positive signals regarding China-Indian relations. It corrects the recent heating-up trend of India's attitude and actions on border issues, demonstrating a willingness to pragmatically resolve problems and ease bilateral relations.

In fact, this attitude is what China has always adhered to. The border issue is not the whole of China-India ties. It should be placed at an appropriate position in the bilateral relationship and properly managed. Both sides have enough wisdom and ability to resolve the issue through diplomatic and military channels. If India can implement Modi's statement and meet China halfway, bilateral relations moving forward on a healthy and stable track is something that can be expected.

Of course, regarding an interview published in Newsweek, an American magazine with significant influence, Modi clearly understands that the primary audience for these words is in the US and Western public opinion. These statements may not be so "pleasing" to some in Washington who hope to weaken China through worsening relations between China and India, but this is precisely the message India wants to convey to them at the moment. The top authorities of India have maintained a sober cognition toward Washington's desire for escalating "dragon-elephant rivalry" or even to steer China and India toward confrontation, and have kept strategic autonomy in developing relations with China in their own hands. They have also maintained a restrained attitude toward voices both domestically and internationally that hope

for further deepening of ties between the US and India, leaving themselves more room for maneuver.

More importantly, these remarks reflect India's perspective on current geopolitical and economic relations. This interview discusses many aspects of India's "rise" in domestic and foreign affairs, and the views and attitudes of Modi, one of the most important candidates in this election, will undoubtedly offer a glimpse into the important direction of India's development in the next stage. Development remains the most important issue for India, necessitating a favorable regional environment. Being in conflict with China would squeeze the resources needed for development, while maintaining relatively stable relations with China is a more advantageous geopolitical and economic choice for India.

In fact, as two of the most eye-catching developing countries in the world, two Asian nations with ancient civilizations, how to perceive their relationship and how to approach development should transcend the mind-set and imagination of viewing each other as either friend or foe, or the zero-sum game of "your strength is my weakness." In fact, China has consistently advocated for India to grasp the bilateral relationship from a strategic and long-term perspective. India faces significant temptations and strategic traps to overcome in doing so, which requires the country to remain vigilant and discard distractions from third parties with ill intentions at all times.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 3-4-2024

ASEAN dignitaries' intensive visits to China highlight undertones of regional stability

A wave of visits to China can be witnessed among ASEAN countries. Indonesia's president-elect Prabowo Subianto made his first overseas visit to China after he secured a victory in the presidential election, and both sides agreed to promote the comprehensive and high-quality development of bilateral relations. This is followed by the separate visits to China by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Laos Saleumxay Kommasith, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam Bui Thanh Son, and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Timor-Leste Bendito dos Santos Freitas from Tuesday to Friday. This is not only a true reflection of China-ASEAN relations getting closer, but also a vivid practice of regional countries yearning for peace and seeking development.

Seventy years ago, China and Southeast Asian countries held high the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, laying a solid foundation for regional peace, stability and economic prosperity. Over the past 70 years, guided by the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, China has been continuously deepening political exchanges,

economic and trade cooperation, humanistic exchanges with these countries, and striving to jointly build the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and a community of shared future. It has been actively promoting its relations with ASEAN to reach new heights one after another.

From a broader perspective, China and ASEAN have become an important force in maintaining regional peace and stability as well as international justice, as their bilateral and multilateral communication mechanisms have been increasingly enhanced and the two sides have reached more and more consensus on regional and international hotspot issues. This has not only consolidated the foundation of mutual trust in the relations between the two sides, but also provided a strong guarantee for building a China-ASEAN community with a shared future.

Economically, China and ASEAN stand as each other's largest trading partner. In 2023, bilateral trade continued to grow, reaching 6.41 trillion yuan (\$0.89 trillion). ASEAN has been China's largest trading partner for four consecutive years, while China has also been ASEAN's largest trading partner for several years. By July 2023, the two-way cumulative investment surpassed \$380 billion, and China has established more than 6,500 direct investment enterprises in ASEAN countries. Major infrastructure projects such as the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and the China-Laos Railway have become the "gilded signboard" of China-ASEAN cooperation and have benefited people along the route.

Against the backdrop of "fierce competition with China" pushed by the US, some Western countries have aired a twisted view of "de-Sinicizing" the production and supply chain, but the cooperation between China and ASEAN countries in this area hasn't seen "decoupling;" on the contrary, the two sides are deeply embedded in each other, embarking on a new path of integrated development. In 2023, China's imports and exports of intermediate goods with ASEAN reached 4.13 trillion yuan (\$570 billion). ASEAN has remained China's largest trading partner for intermediate goods for many consecutive years. The two sides have deepened cooperation in energy, electronics, agricultural products and other industries.

With the in-depth implementation of the BRI and the gradual advancement of the building of the community of shared future, China and ASEAN countries have been promoting people-to-people exchanges. Especially since the beginning of this year, China and a number of ASEAN countries have realized mutual visa exemption, making people-to-people exchanges more frequent and convenient and increasing the mutual goodwill between the two sides.

According to the State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey Report, compiled by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute

based in Singapore, China continues to be regarded as the most influential country in Southeast Asia economically and politically. The majority of respondents believe that Southeast Asian countries' relationship with China is improving, while confidence in the US as a strategic partner and provider of regional security has declined significantly. More than half of the respondents chose China when asked if ASEAN was forced to align itself with either China or the US. This is the first time more people in Southeast Asia have preferred China over the US since the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute began the survey in 2019.

The results of this survey also highlight the truth proven by 70 years of practice: Only through peaceful coexistence can there be lasting prosperity; only through frank and sincere treatment of each other can there be long-lasting friendship; only through mutual assistance can there be win-win cooperation.

As President Xi Jinping pointed out during his meeting with Prabowo, the key to successful China-Indonesia relations is to adhere to strategic independence, mutual trust and mutual assistance, win-win cooperation, and fairness and justice.

The current China-ASEAN relations especially need the leadership of top leaders and policymakers. On the one hand, some forces in the West make a big fuss about a new cold war, engage in geopolitical confrontation, and attempt to push Southeast Asia into a cold war-style whirlpool. As a result, the regional countries are facing the choice of where to go and what to do. On the other hand, certain ASEAN countries have been deluded by external forces, allowing themselves to be manipulated, insisting on stirring up trouble in the South China Sea, artificially exacerbating regional tensions, and attempting to incite other countries in the region to join in the chaos.

At this critical moment, the intensive visits to China by important figures from ASEAN countries are a practical demonstration of saying no to bloc confrontation. At the same time, they have made a wise choice in line with the historical trend.

Hopefully, more countries in the region will join the family of maintaining peace and stability and together promote greater achievements in China-ASEAN relations. We also sincerely look forward to continuing joining hands with ASEAN countries, taking the opportunity of the 70th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence this year to vigorously carry forward the Bandung Spirit that calls for solidarity, friendship and cooperation, to eliminate external interference, enhance solidarity and cooperation, safeguard peace and tranquility and provide more positive energy and stability to the region and the world.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 1-4-2024**China strongly opposes, condemns provocative visit of UK politicians to the island of Taiwan****By GT Staff Reporters**

China voiced firm opposition on Sunday toward the ongoing visit to the island of Taiwan this week by a "Labor Friends of Taiwan" delegation composed of some Labor members of the House of Lords and MPs, saying the visit is a blatant violation of the one-China principle and serious interference in China's internal affairs, and the visit also sends a wrong signal to the island's separatist forces for "Taiwan independence."

The provocative visit, which came after the UK has accused China of the so-called cyberespionage and criticized China for the recently implemented the Article 23 legislation in Hong Kong as well as the South China Sea issue, is considered another political maneuver that some British politicians have been playing in order to "create bargaining chips" for themselves, and sending out "a chilling effect" for UK-China relations, some experts said.

We express strong condemnation over the visit, a spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in the UK said in a statement on Sunday. We urge relevant British politicians to stop violating the one-China principle and stop interfering in China's internal affairs. The relevant British politicians must know that any act that undermines China's interests will be met with forceful responses, the spokesperson said.

A seven-member delegation led by Lord Sonny Leong, co-chair of the "Labor Friends of Taiwan," arrived in Taiwan on Saturday. They are scheduled to meet the island's regional leader Tsai Ing-wen, focusing on the trade and business relations as well as technology innovation between the UK and island, according to local media reports in the island.

The visit also came after the British Foreign Secretary David Cameron warning a Chinese mainland "blockade of the island" would cripple the global economy while British politicians have scripted a big "China threat" farce by alleging that "China state-affiliated actors" are involved in cyberattacks targeting British democratic institutions and lawmakers, after which the UK announced sanctions on Chinese individuals and a company.

"The UK should fully recognize that it lacks the strength and the genuine will to interfere in China's Taiwan question and the South China Sea affairs, and those [provocative] actions are like scratching an itch through a boot - incapable of posing a real challenge to our core diplomatic interests," Gao Jian, director of the Center for British Studies at Shanghai International Studies University, told the Global Times on Sunday.

The UK side is also deeply aware that the Taiwan question is the most sensitive red line in China's foreign policy, and the UK dares not risk its own diplomatic interests to touch China's diplomatic red lines, Gao said, noting that thus, minor harassing actions can only be seen as meaningless, devoid of any real diplomatic principles and strategies.

While the UK's approach toward handling UK-China relations centers on three points, including protecting national security, aligning goals with its allies and strengthening collective security, as well as engaging with China for a stable relationship, some Chinese experts said that while it is engaging with China, the UK also believes that the so-called challenges from China are increasingly rising.

"The reason some British politicians are making provocations on the Taiwan question is that they want to create bargaining chips for themselves," Cui Hongjian, a professor with the Academy of Regional and Global Governance with Beijing Foreign Studies University, told the Global Times on Sunday.

Besides the UK politicians, a delegation from the European Parliament and German Bundestag also visited the island recently, reaffirming their so-called support for the island, according to local media reports.

"The DPP authorities pay an extortionate amount of money to get Western politicians and parliamentarians to visit the island as a means of trying to procure support for separatism," Tom Fowdy, a British political and international relations analyst, told the Global Times on Sunday.

The fact that the alleged cyberattack happened in 2021 but the "perpetrator" was not named until three years later shows the political timing of the announcement was deliberate and was also coordinated astutely with the British right-wing Conservative aligned press, he noted.

As the UK has been continuously making negative moves that could undermine the UK-China relations, some experts said the bilateral relations will generally be in a rather chilly state this year.

Despite the UK having previously signaled a desire to engage with China, including in the economic and trade fields where they indeed have many needs, the overall stance now doesn't seem to prioritize diplomacy for the UK, Cui noted.

"Even within the realm of foreign affairs, issues such as the relationship with the US, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and relations with Europe, might appear more critical to the UK. Therefore, unless something unexpected happens, China-UK relations will remain relatively cold this year," Cui said.

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THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 14-4-2024

Who will win Lok Sabha elections in 2024? Pre-poll survey says BJP holds...

HT News Desk

The BJP holds a commanding 12 percentage points lead over the Opposition's INDIA alliance ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, according to a pre-poll survey by Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS).

Who will win the Lok Sabha 2024 elections? 10 points of survey

1. The BJP holds a significant 12 per cent lead over the Opposition INDIA bloc in the upcoming polls, with four out of ten voters supporting the BJP. The Congress is also expected to make slight gains, but they are unlikely to pose a significant threat.

2. Over half of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the BJP's 10-year-old government performance, indicating positive inclinations towards giving the Modi government another chance, The Hindu reported.

3. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Modi guarantee' is gaining traction among voters, giving him an advantage over Rahul Gandhi's guarantees.

4. Despite maintaining a lead, there's a notable decline in satisfaction with the government's performance compared to 2019. Urban areas show lower support for another term.

5. PM Modi's persona remains a decisive factor, with close to half of the respondents preferring him as the prime minister over Rahul Gandhi.

6. The construction of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya stands out as Modi's most admired work, resonating strongly among voters, particularly NDA supporters.

7. Rising prices and increasing unemployment are significant concerns among voters, raising questions about the sustained popularity of Modi and the BJP.

6. Despite economic distress, the BJP maintains its lead, indicating voter sentiments may not align solely with economic performance, presenting a fascinating aspect of the upcoming election.

8. The BJP's stronghold in the north and west contrasts with limited success in the south, though improvements in states like Karnataka suggest potential gains.

10. Direct contests between BJP and Congress favour the former, but multi-cornered contests show a three-way split in support.

What are the key issues in the Lok Sabha 2024 elections?

1. Concerns over price rise and job scarcity dominate voter sentiments, with over half of respondents

expressing worry about these issues, according to the CSDS-Lokniti pre-poll survey, reported *Live Mint*.

2. A significant majority, comprising 62 per cent of respondents, perceive job acquisition as increasingly challenging, with only 12 per cent feeling otherwise.

3. Across various demographics, including Muslims (67 per cent), Hindus from Other Backward Classes (63 per cent), Scheduled Tribes (59 per cent), and upper castes (57 per cent), the sentiment of job scarcity prevails.

4. The survey underscores the impact of inflation on households, with 71 per cent of respondents reporting an increase in commodity prices, particularly affecting the poor and Muslim communities.

5. Additionally, a majority (55 per cent) perceive a rise in corruption over the past five years, with blame apportioned to both the central government (25 per cent) and state administrations (16 per cent).

The Lokniti-CSDS Pre-Poll survey 2024 collated responses from 10,019 people across 19 states.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 14-4-2024

Elections 2024: First phase test for BJP, Opposition

April 19 crucial for NDA's 400+ ambitions, INDIA challenge as 102 constituencies across 21 states/UTs go to polls

Aditi Tandon

On April 19, the world's largest electoral exercise will kick off in India as 96.8 crore people begin voting through seven phases until June 1 to elect a new Parliament. Over 10 per cent of the global population will participate in what Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar describes as the biggest festival of democracy.

82 lakh Voters above 85 years can vote in 2024

2.18 lakh centenarians registered as voters

19.74 cr Voters in the age group of 20-29 years

1.8 cr first-time voters can cast vote in 2024

The staggering scale of the Indian General Election 2024 shines in one statistic — 69 per cent people in the world's most populous country have enrolled themselves to vote in this election as against 49 per cent in the first Lok Sabha poll of 1952, when a fledgling nation was just beginning to experiment with the democratic electoral process.

17.32 cr Number of voters in first Lok Sabha poll in 1952

96.8 cr Voters in 18th Lok Sabha poll in 2024

49% of population enrolled as voters in 1952

69% of population enrolled as voters in 2024

As is the case today, global interest in Indian elections was at its prime even in 1952.

The Election Commission of India records reveal that Chester Bowles, the US ambassador to India (1951-53) who arrived here on the eve of the 1952 General Election, was convinced that the best solution for Asian countries would be a benevolent dictatorship like that of Kemal Ataturk in Turkey.

“However, after seeing the world’s largest elections in India from close quarters, Bowles felt it was time to revise the pessimistic, somewhat arrogant, assumption that democracy is practical only for highly developed, educated people,” an ECI compendium on India’s electoral journey notes.

The fact that the size of the national electorate has grown a phenomenal 5.62 times — from 17.32 crore in the first Lok Sabha poll to 96.8 crore in the 18th — is a sign of the Indian voters’ abiding faith in democracy.

With the marathon poll season rolling out, all eyes are on the crucial first phase on April 19, as the BJP strongman and two-term Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance faces off with the Congress-led INDIA bloc that will fight to halt a saffron surge.

For the BJP, seeking a third term, this poll is all about Modi, his schemes covering 60-crore beneficiaries, his promise of making India the third largest global economy, and his stress on cultural revival through the Ram Mandir consecration.

For the Congress, the party that ruled India for 54 of the 76 years since Independence, this election is a test of survival. In 2014 and 2019, the Congress was restricted to 44 and 52 seats in the ‘House of the People’, which did not have a Leader of Opposition for two straight terms (to get the Leader of Opposition position, a party must have 10 per cent strength of the Lok Sabha. The current Lok Sabha has 543 MPs, and 10 per cent is 54).

Banking on pre-poll alliances

The highest number of constituencies — 102 — across 21 states/UTs will see voting in phase one on April 19. This is 19 per cent of the entire Lok Sabha strength of 543.

Key battleground states across the North, South, West, East and the Northeast will vote during this phase and witness a significantly distinct election, its defining feature being the dominance of allies in the electoral strategies of both the ruling BJP and the Opposition Congress. Both parties, in a bid to outdo one another, have stitched sizeable pre-poll alliances with state partners.

For the first time in its history, the Congress, India’s principal Opposition party, will majorly contest in pre-

poll pacts with members of the anti-BJP INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) grouping.

Of the 102 seats in the first phase, Congress nominees will fight 56 and allies 46 — a move the party explains with the adage: “We must stoop to conquer.”

The Congress is reconciled to contesting somewhere near 350 constituencies in the 2024 General Election — a massive drop from 423 it contested in 2019, the same year when the BJP not only contested more seats (437) than the Congress for the first time, but also the highest ever seats since its inception in 1980.

“We need to stop the BJP and that’s the goal,” a Congress leader explains.

On allies, even the BJP, driven by the goal of crossing 370 seats on its own and 400 with the NDA, is contesting in alliance with newfound partners — RLD in Uttar Pradesh; JD(U) in Bihar; Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar-led NCP in Maharashtra; PMK in Tamil Nadu and regional partners across the Northeast.

The PM would have to lead the BJP to a better show than 2019 in phase one if he has to achieve the party’s major goals — 50 per cent vote share in the 2024 polls (never attained by any party in the past) and 400-plus seats (the Congress won the highest-ever seats, 404, in 1984).

Stakes in south

While the first phase is a proverbial ‘make or break’ for the Opposition alliance, it is equally important for PM Modi’s poll target of 400-plus seats for the ruling NDA.

Out of 102 seats going to polls in the first phase, non-BJP parties hold 60 in the outgoing Lok Sabha, and the BJP 42.

The second highest seat holder in this phase is Tamil Nadu’s ruling DMK, with 23 segments in the 17th Lok Sabha. The Congress has 15 seats; BSP, SP and others in the Northeast have the rest.

All 39 seats of Tamil Nadu will vote on April 19. While the INDIA bloc (Congress, DMK and allies) faces the challenge of offsetting anti-incumbency to repeat their spectacular 2019 showing in Tamil Nadu, the BJP will seek a dignified entry into the state’s electoral space.

In 2019, the DMK-led alliance had swept Tamil Nadu winning 38 of 39 seats (DMK won 23 and the Congress 8). The AIADMK won one and the BJP drew a blank.

Tamil Nadu will test the PM’s poll acumen, with saffron forces eyeing a double-digit vote share and some seats.

The INDIA alliance, on the other hand, claims a comfortable edge.

For the BJP, the PM has led a spate of rallies in the state, building poll narratives around the Congress and DMK’s act of gifting Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka;

DMK's anti-Sanatan remarks; Ram Mandir outreach ahead of the consecration in Ayodhya; emotional appeals around the Chola dynasty Sengol and repeated invocation of the historic links between the North and the South through Kashi and Tamil Nadu.

The DMK and the Congress have countered Modi's aggressive pitch with promises of a caste census every five years, allegations of misuse of Central agencies against the Union government, claims of discrimination in fund flow to non-BJP-ruled states and accusations of bias against the state Governor.

The DMK manifesto has gone far enough to assure appointment of Governors with Chief Ministers' consent and repealing Article 356, which permits dissolution of state assemblies. Revocation of the Citizenship Amendment Act, National Education Policy, Uniform Civil Code, one nation-one election plan, the Agnipath scheme and restoration of statehood for J&K are the other Opposition planks for the voters.

To the Congress' comfort, seat sharing with INDIA ally DMK was largely amicable, unlike with the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal. The allies agreed to the following division of seats — 21 DMK, 9 Congress and the rest allies.

In the NDA, the BJP is contesting 23 seats, PMK 10 and allies the rest. The AIADMK (which did not ally with BJP) will fight 32 seats in alliance with DMDK (5 seats) and other smaller parties.

Tamil Nadu will be keenly watched for BJP's performance. The party needs to do better in the South to push up LS numbers. Out of 129 seats in five southern states, BJP has 29 (25 out of Karnataka's 28 seats and four out of Telangana's 17). It has no MP in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.

BJP mainstay

Like the INDIA alliance hitting saturation limits in Tamil Nadu in 2019, the BJP swept the Hindi belt, bagging more than 50 per cent votes in 11 states and UTs, mostly across the north.

Many of these seats will go to polls in the first phase — Bihar (4), MP (6), Rajasthan (12), UP (8) and Uttarakhand (5). Of these 35 seats, the BJP and allies hold 30. The only first-phase Hindi belt seats the non-BJP parties hold are MP's Chhindwara and west UP's Saharanpur, Bijnor, Nagina (BSP) and Moradabad (SP).

The Congress would need a strategic campaign to gain from BJP's 2019 saturation across the Hindi heartland.

The BJP, conscious of the challenge, has dropped many sitting MPs in these states to beat anti-incumbency trends.

Among 429 candidates declared so far, the BJP has dropped 109 of its 303 sitting MPs in the 17th Lok

Sabha. In Rajasthan alone, it has benched 11 of the 25 sitting MPs and in west UP, it has denied a renomination to Varun Gandhi, the late PM Indira Gandhi's grandson, from Pilibhit.

In Uttarakhand, the BJP has replaced two of its five sitting MPs, including a former CM.

West UP remains a deep focus area for the BJP as the majority of 14 seats it lost in the state in 2019 fall here. The BJP has spoilt Opposition equations in the region, having brought RLD to its side and conferring the Bharat Ratna on the late PM Choudhary Charan Singh, the grandfather of RLD chief Jayant. In 2019, the SP, BSP and RLD contested as a bloc. BSP has gone alone this time, with both the BJP and the Congress hoping for Mayawati to play a spoiler for the other.

Northeast segments

Of the 25 Lok Sabha seats across eight northeastern states, 15 will see voting in the first phase, with the BJP holding seven in the outgoing Lok Sabha and the Congress and regional parties the rest. Here, too, INDIA allies are harbouring high hopes of defeating the BJP.

North Bengal

Cooch Behar, Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri will vote in phase one. All are located in the northern belt, which gave the BJP seven of its 18 seats in West Bengal in 2019, close behind the ruling TMC's overall tally of 22.

The BJP has renominated sitting MPs from Cooch Behar (Nishith Pramanik) and Jalpaiguri (Jayant Roy), replacing Alipurduar MP and Union Minister John Barla with Assembly chief whip Manoj Tigga.

The saffron forces hope to retain all three seats, having gone an extra mile to woo the dominant Rajbanshis, who are nearly 39-lakh-strong across north Bengal. The BJP recently nominated erstwhile Rajbanshi royal Anant Rai to the Rajya Sabha, with TMC countering the move by sending tea garden worker Prakash Baraik to the House of Elders.

While the TMC is labouring to halt the BJP in its tracks, saffron forces are aggressively pitched against the ruling party, weaving a new campaign narrative around women's alleged victimisation by TMC strongman Sheikh Shahjahan in Sandeshkhali.

But, observers say, TMC chief Mamata Banerjee is not one to be overwhelmed easily. "She did not think twice before parting with the INDIA bloc and going it alone," points out an analyst.

The Congress and the Left, fighting together, are seen as marginal players in West Bengal, where they respectively won two and zero seats in 2019.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 10-4-2024

8% of women candidates to contest Lok Sabha phase 1 polls on April 19

Akshita Kumari

Six states namely Chhattisgarh, J&K, Lakshadweep, Manipur, Nagaland, and Tripura have 11, 12, 4, 10, 3, and 9 candidates contesting in the elections respectively with zero women candidates. Eight percent of women candidates will be contesting the first phase of Lok Sabha polls on April 19. 102 seats will go to polls in the first phase which will see 1,625 candidates in fray including 1,491 male candidates and 134 women candidates which translates to 8%.

Madhya Pradesh with 88 candidates (7 women), Maharashtra with 97 candidates (7 women), Meghalaya with 10 candidates each (2 women), Mizoram with 6 candidates (only 1 woman), Puducherry with 26 candidates (3 women), Rajasthan with 114 candidates (12 women), Sikkim with 14 candidates (only 1 woman), Uttar Pradesh with 80 candidates (7 women), Uttarakhand with 55 candidates (4 women) and West Bengal with 37 candidates (4 women).

Six states namely Chhattisgarh, J&K, Lakshadweep, Manipur, Nagaland, and Tripura have 11, 12, 4, 10, 3, and 9 candidates contesting in the elections respectively with zero women candidates. Meanwhile, the largest number of candidates contesting in the first phase polls are from the southern state of Tamil Nadu with 950 candidates, including 76 women candidates from 39 parliamentary constituencies while the smallest number is from the northeastern state of Nagaland with 3 candidates and no women candidate.

The second phase of the Lok Sabha elections 2024 will be held on April 26 across 88 seats in 12 states and UTs – Tripura, Assam, West Bengal, Karnataka, Kerala, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Jammu & Kashmir, and Uttar Pradesh, along with one part of Manipur (Outer Manipur).

The remaining five phases are scheduled on May 7, May 13, May 20, May 25, and June 1.

The counting of votes will take place on June 4.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 9-4-2024

Lok Sabha polls: Of 419 candidates named by BJP so far, 16% are women

Smriti Kak Ramachandran

There are 67 women among the 419 candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls announced by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) so far. At 16%, the number is higher than the 12% of women candidates the party fielded in 2019 (53 of 437), but it is lower than the 33%

mentioned in the Women's Reservation Bill, 2023 that the party steered through Parliament last year. The 67 number may increase marginally (as may the proportion), since the party is yet to announce names for about 20-30 seats, but party leaders admitted that it will take a few more years to identify and train women to take the proportion higher.

To be sure, the BJP has fielded more women candidates in every election since 2014, when women made up only around 9% of its candidates (38 of 428). That number was a drop from 2009, when women accounted for 10% of its candidates (44 of 433). There's no clear trend in the outcomes, though: in 2019, 71% of the women candidates fielded by the BJP won, roughly the same as men; but in 2014, 78.95% did, much higher than the proportion of men that did.

With 78 women, the 17th Lok Sabha boasted the highest proportion of women lawmakers, although this was still just over 14%. The Congress, which contested 262 seats, fielded 54 women (20%) in 2019, a higher proportion than the BJP, although only 11% of the women it fielded won. The Trinamool Congress, which contested 42 seats, fielded 16 women (38%), of which 56% won; and the BJD, which contested 21 seats, fielded six women (28%), of which 83% won. But in absolute terms, given its sweeping success across India, the BJP sent most women to the 17th Lok Sabha.

“The process of training women leaders is underway, but it will be a long-drawn process. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been pushing for women-led development and their empowerment, which includes giving them political representation as well,” said a party leader who asked not to be named.

The leader, part of the PM-led central election committee, which takes a call on deciding the candidates, said that on several occasions, Modi nudged the state units to send the names of more women candidates. “In 2009, when he was the chief minister of Gujarat, he introduced the bill to increase reservation for women in panchayats and urban local bodies from 33 to 50%. The long-pending women reservation bill was passed in Parliament last year. He walks the talk on women led development and their empowerment.”

Women are one of the key constituencies that the BJP has nurtured since coming to power at the centre in 2014. As per the election commission 470 million women are listed as voters for the upcoming polls. The government's claims of being committed to their welfare are based on women-centric schemes, such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandhana Yojna and the recently announced interventions such as the Lakhpati Didi scheme that is aimed at helping women entrepreneurs, and the Drone

Didi scheme for training women to become drone pilots for agricultural purposes.

The party is however aware that nothing can burnish its credentials as a women-friendly party as political representation can.

Party leaders claims that over the years there has been a conscious effort to draw more women to electoral politics.

The representation of women in Parliament itself has risen over the years. In 1957 there were 22 women elected to Parliament of the 45 who contested. Over the next few elections, it hovered between 20 to 30, rising to 43 in 1984.

“While it is true that many women in politics, in most of the parties, including ours come from political families , there are many examples of women who have come from disadvantaged groups and sections of society. Some of them are from what are known as atipichda varg (most backward castes),” said a second BJP functionary.

The elevation of President Droupadi Murmu, from a party worker to the highest Constitutional Office, the leader said, is a shining example of the BJP’s commitment towards women. “That one example is the biggest draw for women from poor and backward families to consider stepping into a male bastion,” the second person said, asking not to be named.

He cited the example of Rekha Patra who is the party candidate from Basirhat in West Bengal and a victim of the violence in Sandeshkhali. “The PM called her Shakti Swaroopa (embodiment of power) and now she represents the poor and voiceless women in Bengal and elsewhere,” he said.

But candidates such as Patra are too few and far between. “It is for this reason that the Mahila Morcha has been focussing on identifying women leaders who do not come from privilege. There are villages where women in politics are looked down upon, even years after their presence at the Panchayat level. In some places men still rule by proxy...but we are striving to change that,” said a senior functionary of the party’s women’s wing.

Among the 67 candidates named so far, a sizeable number come from political families, including Bansuri Swaraj from New Delhi, daughter of late BJP leader Sushma Swaraj; D. Purandeswari from Rajahmundry, state unit president of Andhra Pradesh, a former minister in the UPA and daughter of the late N.T. Rama Rao ; and Kriti Singh Debbarma, sister of Tipra Motha Party founder Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 10-4-2024

Maharashtra Opposition seals Lok Sabha poll deal; Uddhav's Shiv Sena (UBT) gets 21 seats, Congress 17 and NCP (SP) 10

NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Uddhav Thackeray and state Congress president Nana Patole announced the poll pact

PTI

Mumbai, The opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi on Tuesday announced its seat-sharing formula for the Lok Sabha polls with the Shiv Sena (UBT) getting the major chunk of 21 seats, while the Congress will contest 17 seats and the NCP (SP) 10.

The Congress gave up its claim on the contentious Sangli and Bhiwandi seats, which will now be contested by the Sena (UBT) and the NCP (SP), respectively.

While the Sena (UBT) said the goal of the alliance was to defeat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Congress said it has decided to be “large-hearted” to achieve this objective.

NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Uddhav Thackeray and state Congress president Nana Patole announced the poll pact for the 48 parliamentary seats in the state after weeks of hectic negotiations.

Addressing a press conference at ‘Shivalaya’, the Shiv Sena (UBT) office in south Mumbai, party head and former state chief minister Uddhav Thackeray said the seat-sharing deal has been reached and in an alliance, winning is important and defeating the BJP is the goal.

“When victory against the BJP is the larger goal, we have to set aside certain differences,” he said when asked about the Shiv Sena (UBT) refusing to give Sangli seat to the Congress.

Thackeray said there was a strange coincidence of “surya graham” (solar eclipse), “Amavasya” (new moon) and the BJP rally on the same day (Monday).

“Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech yesterday was not that of a prime minister. When we respond, please don't take it as an insult of the prime minister. Our criticism will be about a leader of a corrupt party,” Thackeray said to a query on Modi referring to his party as “fake Shiv Sena”.

“It is not right for a leader of the party of extortionists to call us fake,” he said. The BJP is a “party of extortionists” and this was seen after the electoral bonds “scam” was exposed, Thackeray claimed.

Maharashtra Congress president Nana Patole said his party has decided to be “large-hearted” to achieve the final goal of defeating PM Modi and the BJP.

The Congress workers will fight the BJP and ensure victory of the MVA candidates in Sangli and Bhiwandi, he said.

“Our workers will never forget how the BJP ill-treated our leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi,” he said.

Patole said the parties of Thackeray and Sharad Pawar were “hijacked” by rebels. “Leaders of both the original parties are with us and Modi calls the Uddhav Thackeray-led party as fake Shiv Sena,” he said.

As part of the deal, the Shiv Sena (UBT) has got Jalgaon, Parbhani, Nashik, Palghar, Kalyan, Thane, Raigad, Maval, Osmanabad, Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg, Buldhana, Hathkanankale, Aurangabad, Shirdi, Sangli, Hingoli, Yavatmal-Washim, Mumbai South, Mumbai South Central, Mumbai North West and Mumbai North East seats.

The Congress has got Nandurbar, Dhule, Akola, Amravati, Nagpur, Bhandara-Gondia, Gadchiroli-Chimur, Chandrapur, Nanded, Jalna, Mumbai North Central, Mumbai North, Pune, Latur, Solapur, Kolhapur and Ramtek seats.

The NCP(SP) will contest Baramati, Shirur, Satara, Bhiwandi, Dindori, Madha, Raver, Wardhan, Ahmednagar South and Beed seats.

The Lok Sabha polls will be held in the state in five phases from April 19 to May 20.

THE HINDU, DELHI 12-4-2024

A three-pronged race: On Telangana and the general election 2024

As the BRS slips, the Congress stays ahead in Telangana

With a behemoth like the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) on the wane on the one hand and frantic crossovers across party lines on the other, Telangana could well be among the most heavily contested States in South India in the general election. While the Congress won an impressive 39% votes in the Assembly election in November 2023, former Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao’s BRS, which is now the principal Opposition party after a decade in power, was only two percentage points short in terms of vote share. The Congress bettered its vote share by 14 percentage points from the 2018 Assembly elections, while the BRS declined by a similar margin from a dominant 47%. But as The Hindu had reported then, the swing against the BRS appears to have gone both in favour of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress: in Adivasi dominated areas for the BJP and Muslim dominated regions for the Congress.

Moreover, in the nearly four months of Congress Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy’s rule, there has been a

marked change in the public’s perception of the government and governance. For one, Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka, the Deputy Chief Minister and a Dalit, now occupies the official residence of the Chief Minister built by K. Chandrashekar Rao in 2016. The building has also been renamed Jyothirao Phule Praja Bhavan to counter the perception of inaccessibility and social exclusion. Sure, KCR’s first deputy and Health Minister, T. Rajaiah, who was sacked within a year of taking oath, was also a Dalit. But so too was his replacement and former Education Minister, Kadiyam Srihari. While most welfare measures promised by the Congress, such as 200 units of free electricity, are yet to be implemented fully due to the Model Code of Conduct in place for the seven-phased Lok Sabha elections, the public appears to be in no hurry yet to write off the Congress. And with recent high profile defections from the BRS to the Congress, such as Mr. Srihari and Rajya Sabha Member K. Keshava Rao, who is widely viewed to be KCR’s trusted lieutenant, the likelihood of the BRS matching its performance in the 2019 general election — nine seats and a 42% vote share — appears bleak. An important indicator not to be missed is the doubling of the BJP’s vote share from 7% to 14% between the 2018 and 2023 Assembly elections. This points to a three-pronged race emerging in Telangana. Assaduddin Owaisi’s party, the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, is still a major player, though without any formal alliance. It remains to be seen how its supporters vote in the seats that it is not contesting.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 14-4-2024

Lok Sabha elections: Congress fields Vikramaditya, Manish Tewari

Saubhadra Chatterji

More candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections were announced after a meeting of the party’s top poll body.

Former Union minister Manish Tewari will contest the upcoming Lok Sabha elections from Chandigarh and Himachal Pradesh minister Vikramaditya Singh from Mandi, the party announced on Saturday, unveiling a list of 16 candidates across three states and one Union Territory.

Hours after a long meeting of the party’s top poll body Central Election Committee (CEC), the Congress announced two candidates from Himachal Pradesh, four from Gujarat and nine from Odisha, apart from Tewari in Chandigarh.

Tewari, the Anantpur Sahib MP and one of the party’s most articulate lawmakers in the Lok Sabha, will take on the Bharatiya Janata Party’s Sanjay Tandon. In Mandi, Singh will contest against actor Kangana

Ranaut. Another high-profile match-up will be in Rajkot, where former leader of Opposition in Gujarat Paresh Dhanani will fight against Union minister Parshottam Rupala.

The prestigious Chandigarh seat was sought by two other heavyweight candidates — former railways minister Pawan Bansal and Chandigarh unit chief Harmohinder Singh Lucky.

“Tewari is a sitting MP while Bansal has lost both in 2019 and 2014. That was possibly the key factor,” said a senior member of CEC.

Tewari was one of the eight Congress MPs from Punjab in 2019. He wanted to shift to Chandigarh — a place with his family roots — and the Congress was open to fielding him from a place of his choice, said a second senior leader, requesting anonymity.

The party’s decision to field Singh — son of late six-time chief minister Virbhadra Singh and sitting Mandi MP and state unit chief Pratibha Singh — was also strategic.

After massive cross voting in the Rajya Sabha elections led to the defeat of Congress candidate Abhishek Singhvi in February, the party leadership sprang into action to quell factionalism in the state Congress. “Singh is the political heir of his father. He is a strong candidate from Mandi. But also, we have ensured the Singh family’s involvement in the election,” said a third senior leader.

CEC has also approved former Union minister Srikant Jena’s candidature from Balasore in Odisha. Jena joined the Congress on March 6 and was a Union minister under three PMs — Vishwanath Pratap Singh, HD Deve Gowda and Manmohan Singh.

CEC on Saturday formed a panel of senior leaders to suggest suitable candidates for three to four seats of Haryana, as no decision could be reached for those constituencies. According to people familiar with the matter, CEC cleared former MP Deepender Hooda from Rohtak, and former MP Shruti Chowdhury from Bhiwani. “CEC is also set to have cleared Dharambir Gandhi from Patiala and the party’s joint treasurer Vijay Inder Singla from Ludhiana,” said a CEC member.

In the list, the Congress named Ramji Thakor, a Gujarat Kshatriya Thakor Sena (GKTS) group leader, from Mahesana, Ahmedabad city Congress chief Himmatsingh Patel from Ahmedabad East, Dhanani from Rajkot and trade union leader Naishadh Desai from Navsari.

With the latest list, the Congress has announced 268 candidates.

In Shimla, the Congress nominee is Vinod Sultanpuri, a legislator of the Himachal Pradesh assembly. The party also announced former Rajya Sabha MP Anant Prasad

Sethi from Bhadrak, former MP Anchal Das from Jajpur, former Mahila Congress chief in Odisha Sashmita Behera from Dhenkanal, Sidharth Swarup Das from Kendrapara, former minister Rabindra Kumar Sethy from Jagatsinghpur, Sucharita Mohanty from Puri and NSUI state unit chief Yasir Nawaz from Bhubaneswar.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 11-4-2024

BJP’s 10th candidates’ list for Lok Sabha election: Uttar Pradesh minister Jaiveer Thakur to take on Dimple Yadav in Mainpuri

It fields Neeraj Shekhar, the son of former prime minister Chandrashekhar, in Ballia

PTI

Lucknow, The BJP on Wednesday announced its 10th list of candidates for the Lok Sabha elections, pitting Uttar Pradesh minister Jaiveer Singh Thakur against Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav’s wife Dimple Yadav from Mainpuri.

Of the nine candidates announced by the BJP in its 10th list, seven are from Uttar Pradesh.

In Ballia, it has fielded Neeraj Shekhar, the son of former prime minister Chandrashekhar. Shekhar has been fielded in place of four-term MP Virendra Singh Mast.

In Allahabad, the party denied a ticket to incumbent MP Rita Bahuguna Joshi and announced Neeraj Tripathi as its nominee.

A lawyer, Tripathi is the son of former Uttar Pradesh Assembly speaker and West Bengal ex-governor Kesari Nath Tripathi.

BP Saroj, the incumbent MP from Machhlishahr (SC), has been retained. The BJP has also renominated Vinod Sonkar from Kaushambi (SC).

Paras Nath Rai will contest on a BJP ticket from Ghazipur, where current Jammu and Kashmir Lt Governor Manoj Sinha lost to the Bahujan Samaj Party’s (BSP) Afzal Ansari in 2019.

Ansari—the brother of gangster-politician Mukhtar Ansari, who died recently—is the Samajwadi Party candidate from Ghazipur.

Rai, whose son Ashutosh Rai was the state unit chief of the Bhartiya Janata Yuva Morcha, is considered close to Sinha and runs an education institute in Ghazipur.

From Phulpur, the BJP has fielded Praveen Patel.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 2-4-2024

Lok Sabha elections 2024: Despite demands to support VBA, Congress fields Akola candidate

A section of state unit had sought high command nod to support VBA chief

Express News Service

Despite a section of Maharashtra Congress asking the party high command to support Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) chief Prakash Ambedkar in Akola, the party high command Monday announced the name of Abhay Patil as its candidate from the Lok Sabha seat.

Earlier on Sunday, Maharashtra Congress chief Nana Patole had alleged that the VBA was acting at the behest of BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis. However, a section within the party has requested the high command in Delhi to extend support to the VBA chief in Akola seat.

“Prakash Ambedkar has extended support to Congress on seven Lok Sabha seats. As per his announcement, he declared support for Nagpur and Kolhapur seat. We have requested the party high command to rethink on Akola Lok Sabha seat and think about extending support to Prakash Ambedkar on Akola seat from where he is contesting,” Leader of Opposition in Maharashtra Assembly Vijay Wadettiwar said earlier Monday.

Wadettiwar’s demand resonated within the large section of Maharashtra Congress which was hopeful of an alliance with VBA in the state. On Sunday, Patole had slammed Ambedkar for “working on instructions of Fadnavis”. “It has happened in 2014 and 2019. It is clear that candidates of parties like vanchit (VBA) and Bahujan Samaj Party are working on instructions of Fadnavis. Vanchit is supporting us in Nagpur to defeat Gadkari but he is not supporting us anywhere else. Why? Is it because of BJP’s internal fight between Fadnavis and Gadkari?” he had asked.

Ambedkar had shot back alleging understanding between Patole and BJP.

“I have seen a person for the first time who is not happy over receiving a support for his party’s candidate,” Ambedkar had taunted at Patole.

The VBA chief has extended support to Congress in Kolhapur and Nagpur seat while it has put candidates against the Congress in other four constituencies of the first phase which include Ramtek (SC), Bhandra-Gondia, Chandrapur and Gandchiroli-Chimur (ST).

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 1-4-2024

Apna Dal (K) quits INDIA bloc, joins AIMIM front

PTI

Lucknow, Apna Dal (Kamerawadi) on Sunday formally broke away from the INDIA bloc and tied up with

Asaduddin Owaisi's AIMIM to launch a joint front ahead of Lok Sabha poll.

The two opposition parties floated the PDM Nyay Morcha, calling it a front to bring justice to backward classes, Dalits and Muslims. This is similar to PDA — an acronym for Pichda, Dalit and Alpasankhyak (minorities) — coined by the former Apna Dal (K) ally Samajwadi Party.

Apna Dal (K) leader Pallavi Patel made it clear that the party was no longer an ally of the SP which was a member of the INDIA bloc.

“We are not a part of the INDIA bloc now,” Apna Dal (K) chief Krishna Patel said.

She also said her party's alliance with the SP did not exist anymore and blamed SP chief Akhilesh Yadav for the breakup.

Pallavi said it was Yadav who said the alliance with the Apna Dal was for the 2022 Assembly elections only, and not for the Lok Sabha poll. “We were invited by the Congress to be a part of the INDI alliance and they should have made it clear whether we are a part of the INDIA bloc or not? But the Congress did not take much interest,” Pallavi said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-4-2024

Lok Sabha 2024: What’s happening in Tamil Nadu and ‘who’s that’ Aannamalai

Vibha Sharma

Chandigarh, The Lok Sabha elections in Tamil Nadu—the southern state, which the BJP has not been able to impact so far—are being watched keenly by observers and one of the reasons also is saffron party’s state president K Annamalai, an Engineer, MBA, and former IPS officer and now its Coimbatore candidate.

Recently, his name also found mention in the speech of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who slammed DMK, saying that Annamalai's "insult" by senior DMK leader (read Dayanidhi Maran) will resonate in Tamil Nadu results.

Maran had questioned Annamalai's antecedents saying "who is that" and called him a “joker”. In turn Annamalai said Maran was “useless without his family's surname”. “If you remove this word Maran from his name he will not even get a job in any place. He is totally, totally useless without his family surname,” he was quoted as saying.

Battle for Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu sends as many as 39 MPs to the Lok Sabha.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the alliance led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam won 38 of the 39 seats there.

In 2024, the battle for Tamil Nadu can be summarised as the DMK's bid to retain 38 seats it won, former NDA ally and rival All India Anna Dravidian Progressive Federation (AIADMK) struggle to remain relevant in absence of charismatic leader J Jayalaithaa and the BJP's desire to dislodge traditional Dravidian parties controlling the state's politics for decades.

Some opinion polls are suggesting an improved vote share for the saffron party in the state.

PM Modi has made multiple visits to the state in the past few months, targeting both the ruling DMK and its ally Congress on issues related to "corruption" and keeping people in the "dark" on Katchatheevu.

Who is Annamalai, why is PM taking his name?

In one such rally, one of the many he has undertaken to fulfill his target of 370 Lok Sabha seats for the for BJP and 400 plus for NDA alliance, PM Modi slammed Maran for calling Annamalai a "joker", adding that "answer to such arrogance will come from the people of Tamil Nadu when they vote against DMK".

"When a big DMK leader was asked about our youth leader Annamalai he was so blinded by pride that he asked 'who is Annamalai'... And then used an insulting word that actually describes DMK's character," PM Modi was quoted as saying.

Thirty nine-year-old Annamalai is making his Lok Sabha election debut from Coimbatore but this is not his first election.

In the last Assembly elections, he lost to a DMK candidate in Aravakurichi.

Annamalai joined the BJP in 2020, but before he took the political plunge he already had the reputation of a supercop and was also called 'Singham anna' because of his style of working.

In his career as a police officer, Annamalai reportedly led undercover crackdowns on gutka sales and drug abuse.

Apparently, he decided to quit IPS after a trip to Kailash Mansarovar.

He became the youngest BJP president in Tamil Nadu in 2021 and started gaining prominence because of his oratory skills.

In 2023, he also led a yatra across the state which was praised by PM Modi.

"In Annamalai the BJP senses an opportunity to dent the monopoly of Dravidian parties—the DMK, AIADMK et al in the state. The BJP needs young, aggressive Tamil leaders and the former IPS officer fits that bill," say observers

Fight for survival

Last year, the AIADMK's decision to quit NDA was read as a "major setback for BJP's southern plans, especially Tamil Nadu".

Even the unanimous resolution passed at a high-level meeting chaired by party president E Palaniswami appeared directed at Annamalai.

"With an ulterior motive, the BJP state leadership deliberately defamed Aringar Anna (Annadurai) and late party matriarch J Jayalalithaa as well as incumbent party chief Palaniswami.

"Such malicious, wanton criticism targeting the AIADMK has been going on for a year and has led to deep resentment and outrage among our cadres and office-bearers," the resolution read.

However, there appeared other reasons for the break-up and one was the bid to remain politically relevant in the state. The party passed through tumultuous times, including infighting, after the death of Jayalalitha, losing relevance in the state politics.

Though according to DMK leaders, AIADMK and BJP are still in an "unholy alliance" and in many constituencies AIADMK cadres were "working for the BJP".

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 3-4-2024

EC committed to holding UZ polls in free, fair, neutral manner: Rashida

Staff Correspondent

Election Commissioner (EC) Rashida Sultana said on Tuesday that the Election Commission is firmly committed to hold the upcoming upazila election in a free, fair and neutral manner.

Speaking at Rajshahi Shilpakala Academy after meeting with law and order agencies to hold sixth upazila parishad election she said, "Voters will come to exercise their rights of franchise. We are all responsible to ensure the right to vote." EC Rashida Sultana told the meeting that many changes have been brought in the election rules, regulations and code of conduct.

She urged all intending candidates to submit their nominations online in advance without waiting for the last date.

EC Rashida Sultana also said upazila elections in Sirajganj and Pabna districts will be held through EVM this year. "We have no capability to conduct votes in EVM in all districts equally," she added.

With Commissioner of Rajshahi division Dr Dewan Humayun Kabir in the chair, the meeting was addressed, among others, by Additional Deputy Inspector General of Police Faisal Mahmud, Additional Commissioner of

Rajshahi Metropolitan Police Hemayetul Islam and Regional Election Officer Delwar Hossain.

In all eight districts under Rajshahi division, 24 upazila elections will be held in the first phase on May 8, 19 in the second phase, 14 in the third phase and nine in the fourth phase.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 6-4-2024

EC introduces online nomination submission in 6th upazila election

The Election Commission (EC) has introduced an online nomination submission system which has been made compulsory for the sixth upazila parishad election.

Candidates who want to participate in the election can submit complete nomination papers online and complete the activities related to collecting necessary documents from anywhere, according to a press release of the EC on Friday.

Candidates will also be able to provide security deposit in the preferred conventional effective way online for the submission of nomination papers. Filing nomination papers in a technology-based manner will save the candidates time. Online nomination submission system can be accessed directly by visiting the link www.ecs.gov.bd notice board (Online Submission of Nomination Papers or onss.ecs.gov.bd), it said.

To submit a nomination online, candidates need to complete the registration. In this case, NID verification and face identification are checked. After successful completion of registration, the user ID and password will be sent to the mobile number with which the registration has been done, which has to be stored carefully.

After nomination papers are submitted, the returning officer will perform all the necessary tasks by acknowledging the receipt of the nomination papers submitted online, confirmation, verification / scrutiny, appeal, withdrawal of candidacy, symbol allocation.

By logging in using the provided user ID and password, the candidate can know the update of their submitted nomination papers at any time; As well as receive messages on mobile.

Upazila Election Offices can be contacted for any need related to submission of nomination papers online. EC asked the candidates concerned to ensure the submission of nomination papers online with enough time in hand without waiting for the last time.

For the convenience of the candidates, a video tutorial can be found on the website as well as the designated Facebook page of the Election Commission, Bangladesh Election Commission Secretariat and the following link

"https://youtu.be/hcImF47SkO8?si=eloZo1rI_liBs_G?"
— UNB

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 5-4-2024

Jamaat leaders gearing up for upazila election

To join 1st phase of polls as independents; campaigns on in several districts

Rashidul Hasan

Many leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami are going to take part in the upcoming upazila polls as independents.

The leaders have already started campaigning in advance in different districts where the polls will be held on May 8, the first phase.

Many printed posters which have been circulated in their upazilas. The leaders are seeking votes, report our correspondents in the districts, including Khulna and Satkhira.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Jamaat Assistant Secretary General Abdul Halim yesterday said, "Jamaat-e-Islami will not contest the upazila election as a political party. However, some grassroots leaders have decided that they will run."

Asked whether the party will take any action against those participating in the polls, Halim said they will decide on this later after discussing the matter in the party forums.

Sources in Jamaat said party leaders will contest the elections particularly in those upazilas where there is a strong possibility its leaders' victories. The party's upazila and district committees have been given the job of deciding from where the leaders would run and who would run. Jamaat is not registered with the Election Commission as a political party. Therefore, its candidates will take part in the upazila polls as independents.

The upazila parishad elections will be held in four phases starting from May 8.

Many other opposition political parties, including BNP, boycotted the January 7 parliamentary polls as their demand for holding the general election under a non-party neutral government was not met. Apart from Jamaat, another Islamist party Islami Andolon Bangladesh (IAB) said they have decided to stay away from the upazila polls like they did in the case of the Jatiya Sangsad elections. "We have already sent instructions to the grassroots leaders not to participate in the upazila polls even as independents. Action will be taken against those who will violate the party's decision," IAB Media Coordinator Shahidul Islam told The Daily Star yesterday.

Wishing anonymity, a Jamaat leader said the party does not have representatives in parliament and different local government bodies. Against such a backdrop, the party high-ups are not taking a rigid stance on its leaders' participation in the upazila elections.

According to district correspondents of The Daily Star, Abdur Rahman, amir of Shyamnagar upazila Jamaat in Satkhira, will run for chairman.

Mahbubul Alam, nayeb-e-amir of Satkhita district Jamaat, is campaigning in Debhata upazila.

Hafizur Rahman, secretary of Satkhira district Jamaat, will run for Kaliganj upazila chairman.

Jamaat leaders from Paikgasa and Koyra upazilas in Khulna, and different upazilas of Dinajpur and Gaibandha have also started campaigning.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 8-4-2024

UPAZILA POLLS

AL in for bitter infighting

Partha Pratim Bhattacharjee

In the wake of Awami League's decision not to back any candidate and allow anyone to use the party's electoral symbol in the upcoming upazila elections, many grassroots and central leaders are throwing their weight behind the candidates of their liking.

Ultimately, a political power struggle will likely ensue in the coming weeks among grassroots leaders, incumbent ministers and MPs, defeated MP candidates and the so-called AL independent lawmakers who won the January election race.

Grassroots leaders are making desperate efforts to win the election already, while AL big shots, ministers and parliament members are seeking to retain control over upazila parishads.

Take some examples.

AL Central Working Committee Member and Barishal-1 MP Abul Hasnat Abdullah on March 31 announced the "AL candidates" for all 10 upazilas of the district without any discussion with the respective MPs in those areas, sources said.

Most MPs from the district, which has six constituencies, are also trying hard to field candidates loyal to them.

Noakhali district AL President and Subarnachar upazila Chairman AHM Khairul Anam Chowdhury, 75, at an extended meeting of the upazila on Thursday said Noakhali-4 MP Ekramul Karim Chowdhury named his son Atahar Ishrak Sabab Chowdhury as chairman candidate simply to insult him, according to meeting sources.

"I never wanted to be an MP. I never opposed anyone... Then why shall I be insulted by a young boy?" the sources quoted the three-time chairman as telling the meeting.

On Saturday, Tangail's Madhupur thana unit AL president and general secretary wrote to party President Sheikh Hasina for her action against party Presidium Member Abdur Razzaque for declaring the AL candidate there without consulting the top leaders of the upazila.

Razzaque, the immediate past agriculture minister, named upazila AL Vice-president Yakub Ali, ignoring the upazila unit general secretary and incumbent Madhupur upazila Chairman Sarwar Alam Khan Abu.

Besides, 12 AL lawmakers and one state minister already announced the "AL candidates" loyal to them or their close relatives, grassroots and central AL leaders said.

Ahead of the January 7 polls, around 50 upazila chairmen had resigned to join the parliament election. Of the 40 that eventually joined the race, seven won with AL's electoral symbol and nine as the so-called independent contenders.

Many of the rest upazila chairmen who lost the battle are also seeking to take part in the upazila polls, to be started in phases from May 8.

Former Muksudpur upazila chairman Kabir Miah is one of them. He lost to Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister Mohammad Faruk Khan (Gopalganj-1). He is now vying for the same upazila.

Like Kabir, former upazila chairmen Mokshedul Momin, Gazi Mainuddin, Tarikul Islam and Sheikh Akram Hossain had vied for Nilphamari-4, Chandpur-5, Dinajpur-4 and Khulna-5 respectively. They have now started making preparations to join the local election, according to the sources. Meanwhile, some incumbent MPs are working to ensure easy win for the candidates loyal to them and further tighten their grip on the local politics.

AL sources said this may deepen the already existing rivalry that started centring on the January 7 polls. On the other hand, some AL-nominated MP candidates who lost to the so-called independent candidates are trying to regain ground by backing their own candidates against the MP-sponsored candidates.

A total of 62 independent candidates won the 12th national election. Of them, 57 are leaders of AL and its associate and front organisations. AL men who hold party portfolios in grassroots ran against party-nominated candidates in 181 constituencies out of the total 300.

Like the national election, the upazila polls may ultimately turn out to be a battle between AL

candidates, as mostly the AL contenders, and in some cases Jamaat leaders, are preparing to run.

To minimise the already existing rift, AL top brass have recently started division-wise meetings with grassroots leaders, MPs and the so-called independent MPs. In some of those meetings, party leaders engaged in altercations in a further display of their differences over local politics, sources said. AL Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif said responsible people should act responsibly. "It is unfortunate if any MP picks his son or wife or relatives as party candidates for the upazila election," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Asked about possible confrontations, he said the party's district units have a role in this regard.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 4-4-2024

Politics: Calm before the Storm

Lakdev Lianagama

Political developments continue at a frantic pace in the country as leaders are gearing themselves for national elections after almost five years. This is in a vacuum created by a fall in support for the more established political parties and the emergence of a several political alliances in a short period.

An issue that has dominated discussion is the question as to whether a General Election (GE) will precede a Presidential Election (PE) which is due by mid-October, the latest. Already, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) which enjoys a Parliamentary majority has categorically indicated it prefers this option.

Last week, it appeared that President Ranil Wickremesinghe had arrived at a decision on the matter. He has told the Cabinet and the Election Commission (EC) there will be no elections until economic reforms, conducted in collaboration with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), are completed.

Addressing two meetings separately, the President said the comprehensive economic reform process in conjunction with the IMF holds the key to the nation's economic progress. He declared that polls including the PE will be deferred until the IMF programme concludes at the end of July.

Financial assistance

President Wickremesinghe noted that the timing of the PE, due by mid-September to mid-October, aligns constitutionally with the conclusion of the IMF's financial assistance programme. This strategic sequencing ensures that the IMF programme remains unaffected by the electoral process.

Media reports quoting Government sources said the President has instructed the Cabinet and the EC to focus on preparations for the PE as a priority. A senior

Government spokesperson said that this indicates a GE will not precede the PE.

Thus far, this has been the most categorical indication by the President that he intends to conduct the PE before any other poll. It will be recalled that Local Government (LG) elections, due in March 2023, were also postponed by the Government indefinitely, citing a lack of adequate finances.

With the SLPP, in the form of public statements from both former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as well as its founder and former Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa, having requested that a GE be held first, it remains to be seen how President Wickremesinghe negotiates this vital issue with the party he governs with.

This was not the only matter the SLPP grappled with last week. A key change in that party's hierarchy came with the announcement that Hambantota District Parliamentarian Namal Rajapaksa has been appointed as its new National Organiser. The move took even some party stalwarts by surprise.

The post of National Organiser is a key position in any party as it allows interaction with all politicians at a grass-root level. Crucial issues such as decision-making regarding candidates for LG, Provincial Council (PC) and General polls will also rest with the holder of this office. It is therefore a highly powerful position within the SLPP.

Namal Rajapaksa is the eldest son of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa and has been a Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports. However, at 37, he is not high on the seniority stakes as there are plenty of seasoned politicians within the SLPP who have been Ministers for decades.

Familial affiliations

The appointment of the younger Rajapaksa has sparked criticism that he was being 'fast-tracked' for the leadership of the SLPP ahead of more experienced politicians by virtue of his familial affiliations. Some party members publicly stated that Basil Rajapaksa should have continued to serve as the National Organiser.

The more relevant issue is whether Namal Rajapaksa's appointment at this critical time has an adverse effect on the SLPP. Some Parliamentarians, disgruntled by the notion that their future aspirations for leadership will always be secondary to those of the Rajapaksas could now opt to switch loyalties.

There is a perception that the SLPP will always be led by a member of the Rajapaksa family, just as the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) was led by a Bandaranaike for five decades and the United National Party (UNP) was led for the best part of its first two and a half decades by a Senanayake.

The SLPP leadership is already aware that several Ministers and younger Parliamentarians who have now had the opportunity to serve under President Ranil Wickremesinghe have been impressed with his leadership style, especially in delegating tasks and responsibilities to young politicians.

Rajapaksa's appointment as National Organiser may be just the impetus needed for disgruntled MPs with long term leadership ambitions to cast their lot with President Wickremesinghe. This is a factor that the SLPP leadership will be watching closely, especially with a PE on the cards.

Leadership role

As for Namal Rajapaksa himself, he appears more interested in consolidating his standing within his party and planning towards a national leadership role in about five years, when the next cycle of major elections will be due. He has not expressed much enthusiasm about the polls to be held in 2024.

There had been some initial discussions as to whether Namal Rajapaksa should be the SLPP's Presidential candidate in 2024 but Rajapaksa himself had not evinced any great interest. It is believed this is due to the party's prospects at a poll held this year being diminished significantly.

Dealing with difficulties within a political party has not been the exclusive preserve of the SLPP. The older 'parent' party of the SLPP, the SLFP has also been undergoing a series of traumatic upheavals in recent months at the centre of which is its leader and former President, MP Maithripala Sirisena.

Sirisena caused a stir in political circles when he declared to the media in Kandy that he was aware of who the mastermind behind the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist attacks was. This led to calls for his detention which saw Sirisena clarifying that he got to know these details only three weeks ago.

Since then, after Minister of Public Security Tiran Alles directed Police to investigate these remarks, Sirisena provided a statement to the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) that took over five hours to be recorded. The details of this statement as well the identity of the so-called 'mastermind' remains unknown at this stage.

Sirisena's revelations

Following this statement, the CID filed a report before the Maligakanda Magistrate's Court. The Court has issued a notice directing Sirisena to appear before Court and provide a statement regarding his revelations. This has been listed for today (Thursday).

While dealing with these matters, Sirisena last week summoned a meeting of the party's Central Committee, Executive Council and electorate and district organisers

where a resolution was passed stripping Duminda Dissanayake, Lasantha Alagiyawanna and Mahinda Amaraweera of their posts in the party.

Dissanayake was stripped of his post as the National Organiser, Alagiyawanna as the Treasurer and Amaraweera as the Senior Vice President by this resolution which was presented by Sirisena and passed unanimously. No reasons were given for this drastic overhaul of the party hierarchy.

It was announced that Mahiyangana Electorate Organiser K.P. Gunawardena has been appointed as the new National Organiser of the SLFP, Hector Bethmage as Treasurer and Sarath Ekanayake as Senior Vice-President. However, the resolution was challenged in Court soon afterwards.

On Monday, the Colombo District Court issued an order preventing the SLFP leadership from removing Dissanayake, Alagiyawanna, and Amaraweera from their positions in the party. The trio then visited the party's headquarters at Darley Road, Colombo, and held a media briefing, calling for unity.

"The primary motive behind seeking assistance from the Courts was not to preserve our positions in the party. We cannot continue down a path where a party that once held 140 seats has now dwindled to just two seats. Our aim in approaching the Courts was to safeguard the party," Dissanayake said.

Addressing the briefing, Alagiyawanna urged Sirisena to set aside all differences and to come together as one group to face the challenges confronting the party. He also claimed that certain party organisers are misleading Sirisena, advising him to contest the upcoming PE.

The legal tussles in the SLFP, still the political party which has ruled Sri Lanka for the longest period of time, are set to continue in the coming weeks. Sirisena is also embroiled in a similar dispute with his former General Secretary and maverick MP Dayasiri Jayasekara who is forming an alliance of his own this week.

As the events above indicate, it was not a dull week for politics in Sri Lanka. The battle of wits has begun in earnest in the lead up to the PE later in the year. Even if the New Year period offers a reprieve from the hustle and bustle of politics, it will be the calm before the storm.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 11-4-2024

A prudent step

The Cabinet decision to increase the cash deposits, known in local parlance as the "epey", for candidates contesting national elections across the board is a welcome step. The move would not only eliminate

‘dummy’ candidates cluttering up the field, but also reduce the length of the ballot paper. This would make it less confusing for the voter, especially the unsophisticated village folk who were all at sea the last time around when they received their ballot paper – said to be the longest in our election history.

The cumbersome ballot papers in the past even led to many voters marking the ‘cross’ against the wrong party/candidate. The franchise ought to be a simple exercise. Burdening the voter in whatever way cannot be condoned.

According to the Cabinet decision announced by Cabinet Spokesman, Transport, Highways and Mass Media Minister Dr. Bandula Gunawardhana at the weekly post-Cabinet press briefing, in the case of a candidate contesting a Presidential Election from a recognised political party, the deposit has now been raised to Rs 2.6 million and in the case of an Independent candidate this will be Rs. 3.1 million. Where a General Election is concerned, a candidate contesting from a recognised political party will now be called upon to deposit Rs. 11,000 while an Independent candidate’s deposit will be Rs. 16,000. The decision, according to the Minister, has been taken considering the cost increases all round. Of course, there have been protests from certain quarters who argue that the move could result in the stifling of the franchise by leaving out the ‘poor’ candidates while those in favour contend that the move could deter frivolous candidates and promote more serious contenders.

There is also the case of so-called Independent candidates holding a brief for a candidate contesting from a mainstream party in case of a Presidential Election. At General Elections, there have been plenty of instances where Independent candidates were fielded by political parties to eat up television and radio air time which would otherwise have been made use of by their rivals. This amounts to the trivialization of the franchise – a practice which should be halted. Former Elections Commissioner Mahinda Deshapriya pledged to hound out all such double dealers but retired before this promise was put to a test. It will now be up to the present Election Commission (EC) to ensure that the trivialization of the election process is stopped forthwith.

The former EC Chairman also pledged to ensure that candidates abide by their election manifestos, another progressive step which should engage the attention of the present Commissioners. According to a one-time Prime Minister, election manifestos are mere documents which are not binding on any Presidential candidate or political party that comes to power. In other words, election manifestos are not worth the paper they are written on.

This is tantamount to cheating the electorate and there has to be someone in authority to ensure election

manifestos, or, at least some part thereof is implemented by the victorious candidate(s) or the political party, as the case may be.

The EC has also promised radical changes in the electoral process. Among them are pledges to unseat an elected Member of Parliament (MP), or any other political body, who had engaged in election malpractices, even before an election petition is filed by the aggrieved (losing) party. The EC has also suggested that a National List spot cannot be left vacant for more than two weeks following a General Election and that in such an event the Commission would take upon itself the power to appoint the next candidate in the order of the list.

The EC has now imposed a ceiling on all campaign expenditure by each candidate in the fray, though it has not had the opportunity to put this rule into practice. Of course, there are always ways to bypass the system. They (candidates) do not have to directly get involved in spending. As all Sri Lankans are aware, election funding is largely carried out by proxies of the candidates. A familiar scenario is on Election Day itself where various goodies, including food, are distributed among voters on their way to the polling booth. There are also other favours and blandishments that are made on behalf of the candidates concerned with the candidates themselves remaining innocent.

How is the EC going to keep tabs on this aspect? The Preferential Voting system under the Proportional Representation (PR) method has made it imperative that money bags are thrown around. This is because a candidate cannot just concentrate on his home electorate only, unlike in the earlier First-Past-the-Post (FPP) system. A whole district is involved.

How is the EC going to inquire into the expenditure of a candidate under such circumstances? Closer scrutiny in this respect at least could be possible only under the FPP system where only a single electorate is involved and monitoring would not pose a big problem.

A reversal to the FPP or at least a mix of PR and FPP would also cleanse the electoral process of the corruption that is now prevalent, and also save money both to the State and the individual candidate(s) concerned.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 7-4-2024

Nepali Congress seems to be uniting on fighting elections with own might

Deuba, a vocal supporter of poll alliances, now publicly backs a proposal to go to the elections independently.

Post Report

Kathmandu, The Nepali Congress Mahasamiti in February last week endorsed party general secretary Gagan Thapa’s proposal to contest next elections single-

handedly—with a condition. The condition was that the party's Central Working Committee would have the final word on the issue based on the feedback received in the Mahasamiti.

The gathering had come to such an ambiguous decision as party President Sher Bahadur Deuba was dead against Thapa's proposal.

Over a month later, even Deuba's establishment faction seems to have embraced the anti-poll alliance agenda. In the Mahasamiti meeting, General Secretary Thapa had presented a report stating the party should contest the general elections on its own so as to retain the trust and support of its cadres and well-wishers.

But the establishment faction led by party president Deuba opposed the idea, arguing that electoral alliances result from the need of the hour. The issue shouldn't be decided four years ahead of the elections.

Over five weeks after conclusion of the party jamboree, Deuba has toed the same line and stated that the Congress should contest the coming elections single-handedly and win a majority. "I instruct all friends to work together to gain the majority for the party [in next elections]," Deuba said while addressing a party's function in Kathmandu on Saturday. Time, he said, had come for the party to contest the elections without leaning on any other party.

Deuba's appeal to the party members comes on the nomination day for the April 27 bypolls. Candidates from various political parties on Saturday filed their candidacies for a House of Representatives seat in Ilam-2 and a provincial seat in Bajhang.

In Ilam, the CPN (Maoist Centre) has extended its support to the candidate of CPN-UML while the Congress candidates have so far not joined hands with other parties in Ilam, or in Bajhang.

When Thapa at the Mahasamiti meeting presented the proposal to contest the elections without tying up with other forces, it triggered a shock wave not only in the Congress but also in the CPN (Maoist Centre), the erstwhile partner of the ruling coalition.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal made it an excuse to remove the Congress from the government. The Congress, the Maoist Centre and three smaller parties had formed an alliance and jointly contested the local, provincial and federal elections. The Congress emerged the largest party in the House of Representatives, in all seven provinces and local units in the 2022 elections.

Dahal broke the alliance and joined hands with the UML to become prime minister in December that year. Within months, he ditched the second-largest party UML and re-engaged with the Congress.

Over a year later, on March 4, the prime minister again broke its ties with the Congress and formed a coalition with the UML, the Rastriya Swatantra Party and smaller

parties. "One should understand that forming a pre-election alliance is not a regular political exercise in a democracy, but a compulsion done in a specific situation," Thapa had stated in his political document presented in Mahasamiti. "Realising this fact, we will contest future periodic elections on our own strength and we will ensure that our voters can cast their votes on the Nepali Congress' election symbol."

"In the last local, provincial and federal elections, due to our alliance in several electoral constituencies, our supporters and well-wishers could not vote for the party," Thapa had said while reading out his report. He had said Congress backers in 74 electoral constituencies were unable to vote for their party's candidates and were instead compelled to solicit votes for candidates of other alliance partners.

Now Deuba is trying to convince party members with similar arguments. "The situation is evolving in such a way that we have to win the majority in the coming elections by contesting alone—and I urge you all to work to that end," said Deuba. "It has become imperative for the Nepali Congress to gain majority in next elections single handedly."

Besides the Congress, parties like the UML, the Maoist Centre, and the Swatantra Party have also vowed to contest the elections without forging alliances.

"I do not need to explain any more about the present political situation of the country. You are aware of it. So in view of the current situation, we have to make the party stronger so that we can win the majority by contesting the next elections alone," said Deuba. "It has become imperative for us to come together in a better and coordinated way."

Despite Deuba's call for unity among Congress leaders, factional feud has historically been a major cause of the party's poor performance in elections and while in the government. Deuba also urged party members to end the years-old ill practice of betraying party colleagues and taking revenge especially at the time of elections. "I urge all friends to unite and strengthen the party." In order to achieve this goal, "we have to work from now on," said Deuba, stressing the role of local party

leaders and cadres towards that end.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 5-4-2024

Lumbini, Sudurpaschim chief ministers quit without facing votes of confidence

The provincial governments collapsed as a consequence of the shift in the federal coalition.

Ghanshyam Gautam & Arjun Shah

The political aftershocks of the March 4 change in the federal alliance have finally reached Lumbini and

Sudurpaschim provinces, forcing incumbent chief ministers to step down from their posts.

Addressing the provincial assembly meeting of Lumbini Province on Thursday, Chief Minister Dilli Bahadur Chaudhary announced his resignation after his attempts to regain majority in the assembly failed. The Nepali Congress-led government had fallen into a minority after the formation of the four-party alliance in Kathmandu last month.

Chaudhary expressed his concerns regarding the ongoing political instability caused by frequent changes in government at both the centre and provinces. “We cannot steer the province to peace and prosperity if there is no political stability. People are immensely frustrated. We are unable to address the people’s grievances but have been focussed on forming and toppling governments,” said Chaudhary. “Chief ministers keep on changing. The question now is whether we can institutionalise federalism or not. I wish the new chief minister will work to protect the federal system of governance,” he added.

Chaudhary expressed his concerns about the practice of changing provincial governments with a change in the political climate at the centre. He also claimed that the provinces lacked adequate resources to function and ‘prove their worth’ and have also failed to generate revenues on their own.

Chaudhary was appointed chief minister of Lumbini on April 27, 2023.

Earlier on Thursday, four coalition partners forged a five-point deal to form the provincial government under the leadership of Jokh Bahadur Mahara of the CPN (Maoist Centre). The CPN-UML, Maoist Centre, Janata Samajwadi Party and CPN (Unified Socialist) signed the agreement to form the Lumbini government under the Maoist leadership. Independent member of the assembly, Khadga Basnet, who was elected from Nawalparasi West 2(A) also signed the agreement.

In the 87-member provincial assembly in Lumbini, an assembly member is currently under suspension. The UML has 29 members, the Congress 27, the Maoist Centre 11, and the Rastriya Prajatantra Party and Nagarik Unmukti Party have four members each. Similarly, the Janata Samajwadi Party, Loktantrik Samajwadi Party and Janamat Party have three members each while the Unified Socialist has one and there is one independent member.

Mahara is likely to be appointed as new chief minister as 44 members, which is a majority in the presently 86-member provincial assembly, form the four ruling parties are on his side.

Likewise in Sudurpaschim, Chief Minister Kamal Bahadur Shah threw in the towel after his frantic attempts to get a vote of confidence failed. He tendered

his resignation to Province Head Najir Miya on Thursday evening.

Shah was preparing for the floor test earlier on Thursday. The provincial assembly meeting called for 3:30 pm was postponed twice by the chief minister as Shah was attempting to get support of majority assembly members.

Chief Minister Shah expected that he would get support from all seven members of the Nagarik Unmukti Party. However, two members of the party—Kailash Chaudhary and Tika Thapa who are considered to be close to party chief Ranjita Shrestha—did not come to Dhangadhi from Kathmandu.

Nepali Congress provincial assembly leader Shah had been appointed Sudurpaschim chief minister as per Article 168(3) of the constitution after CPN-UML’s Rajendra Singh Rawal failed to get a vote of confidence in February last year.

Political uncertainty continues in Sudurpaschim due to longstanding dispute between the Nagarik Unmukti Party chair Ranjita Shrestha and her husband Reshamlal Chaudhary on whether to support the provincial government led by Shah. Shrestha on Wednesday asked the provincial assembly secretariat to suspend her party’s Indira Giri from the assembly. The party’s central member Ramlal Dagaura Tharu, the mayor of Tikapur Municipality who is considered close to Shrestha, registered the request for suspension at the assembly secretariat in Dhangadhi amid tight security.

Of the seven Nagarik Unmukti provincial members, five are close to party leader Reshamlal Chaudhary, who is in favour of supporting the incumbent Congress-led government. The two members considered close to party chair Shrestha are against Shah’s government. The Nagarik Unmukti Party, established in 2022, has made a mark in politics following the elections held later that year.

In the 53-member Sudurpaschim assembly, the Congress has 19 members, the Maoist Centre has 10, the UML 9, the Nagarik Unmukti Party 7, the Unified Socialist has three, and the RPP has one, besides an independent lawmaker. Any party claiming the government’s leadership must secure the support of at least 27 assembly members.

Triggered by the March 4 political alliance in Kathmandu, the struggle to retain and change governments in the provinces has become intense in the last few days.

On Wednesday, Gandaki Chief Minister Surendra Raj Pandey of Nepali Congress and Karnali Chief Minister Rajkumar Sharma also put in papers due to the political changes.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 10-4-2024

UML's Kandel appointed chief minister of Karnali

Newly appointed chief minister of Lumbini Jokh Bahadur Mahara is scheduled to seek a vote of confidence in the provincial assembly on Friday.

Jyoti Katuwal, Birendra KC

Birendranagar & Deukhuri

Yam Lal Kandel of the CPN-UML was appointed Karnali Chief Minister on Tuesday. Province Head Tilak Pariyar appointed Kandel, who is UML's provincial assembly leader, to the position after he staked a claim to lead a new government.

Kandel earlier presented his claim for the chief ministerial position with the support of 23 provincial assembly members. Kandel has the backing of 13 lawmakers of the CPN (Maoist Centre), nine of the UML and one of the CPN (Unified Socialist). His swearing-in has been scheduled for Wednesday.

Support of 21 members is needed to command a majority in the 40-member assembly.

Province Head Pariyar had called on political parties to stake a claim for the government after Raj Kumar Sharma of the Maoist Centre resigned from chief minister on Wednesday. Sharma had announced his decision to step down at a meeting of the provincial assembly.

As per a power-sharing deal reached among the ruling coalition partners at the centre, UML was allocated the chief ministership of Karnali.

Sharma along with other province members of the Maoist Centre had refused to implement the centre's decision.

Chief Minister Sharma had planned to seek a vote of confidence in the assembly on Wednesday and the assembly secretariat had made all the arrangements for the same.

But later he backtracked on his floor test plan after receiving instruction from Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who is also the chair of the Maoist Centre. Sharma was the Maoist Centre's provincial assembly leader, and was appointed Karnali Province chief minister on January 11, 2023.

Triggered by the March 4 shift in the ruling coalition in Kathmandu, governments in provinces have been changing in line with the new political equation. New governments were formed in Gandaki, Lumbini and Karnali provinces while the Cabinet was reshuffled in Madhesh and Bagmati provinces. Political uncertainty is looming large in Koshi and Sudurpaschim.

In Koshi, Chief Minister Kedar Karki, who is from the Nepali Congress, is unwilling to resign or seek a confidence vote. His government has fallen into minority after the UML and the Maoist Centre withdrew support to the Karki government in the changed political situation in the country.

Karki was appointed chief minister in October, 2023 as per Article 168(5) of the constitution. Karki, who is considered to be close to Nepali Congress leader Shekhar Koirala, led a group of eight Congress lawmakers who revolted against the party's decision to support a Maoist lawmaker for the chief ministerial position.

On Tuesday, the UML and the Maoist Centre organised a joint press meet in Biratnagar urging Karki to resign immediately.

"Otherwise, we will file a resolution proposal at the provincial assembly. The Province Head should summon a special session of the assembly," said Rewati Raman Bhandari, UML chief whip in Koshi provincial assembly.

Meanwhile, newly appointed chief minister of Lumbini, Jokh Bahadur Mahara, will face a floor test on Friday. Durlabh Kumar Pun, secretary at the provincial assembly secretariat, said Speaker Tularam Gharti Magar has scheduled a meeting of the provincial assembly for 1pm on Friday for the purpose.

Mahara of the ruling Maoist Centre was appointed chief minister on Friday after Dilli Bahadur Chaudhary of the Nepali Congress resigned after his attempts to prove a majority in the provincial assembly failed.

The chief minister is almost certain to secure the confidence of the provincial assembly with the backing of 48 lawmakers including 29 from the CPN-UML, 10 from the Maoist Centre, four from the Nagarik Unmukti Party, three from the Janata Samajbadi Party, one from CPN (Unified Socialist) and one independent member.

Support of 44 members is mandatory to command a majority in the 87-strong assembly.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 8-4-2024

Insights into recent terrorist incident in southeast Iran

TEHRAN- According to a report by Fars News, the recent terrorist incident in southeastern Iran has laid bare the sophisticated equipment and bulletproof vests utilized by the assailants.

This equipment suggests that the terrorists may have received backing from hostile entities.

On Thursday, southeast Iran witnessed a series of attacks targeting security outposts in the towns of

Chabahar and Rask. The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) reported thwarting the attempt to seize their headquarters, but at a cost of 10 security personnel killed. The Jaish al-Adl terrorist group, known for previous attacks in the region, claimed responsibility.

Sistan and Baluchestan province, bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan, has a history of violence, including clashes with Takfiri terrorists and drug traffickers. The Jaish al-Adl group is a familiar threat, having conducted similar operations in the past.

After regaining control and securing the area following the terrorist attack, the IRGC Ground Forces' Southeast Security Headquarters announced the death of 18 terrorists and armed assailants. These individuals, reportedly affiliated with foreign intelligence agencies, planned to destabilize the region by targeting public areas, military installations, and law enforcement facilities in Chabahar and Rask.

Preliminary investigations into the recent terrorist operations in Sistan and Baluchestan reveal significant details about the Jaish al-Zalum group. Reports indicate that this terrorist organization consisted of 29 highly trained operational members, with 18 individuals from its core team meeting a tragic end in the recent violence.

During the harrowing incident, the terrorists sought to employ human shields and take hostages from among the citizens of Chabahar, with intentions to orchestrate a large-scale massacre in the region.

The weaponry and bulletproof gear wielded by the assailants were of an advanced caliber, suggesting possible support from hostile entities linked to Iran's adversaries.

Moreover, the weaponry utilized in the attack displayed heavy destructive capabilities, with sophisticated cartridges mirroring those employed by terrorist groups affiliated with Western intelligence services.

Iranian security and intelligence agencies are diligently delving into the clandestine facets of this terror act, unraveling crucial information and technical nuances to shed light on the incident's broader implications.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 7-4-2024

Iran urges UNSC to denounce terrorist acts in Sistan-Baluchestan

TEHRAN- Amir Saeid Iravani, the Iranian ambassador and permanent representative to the UN, has called on the UN Security Council to slam the terrorist group Jaish al-Adl's recent attacks in the southeast Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchestan and to take the required action to combat terrorism.

In a letter to the UNSC president and the UN chief on Friday night, Iravani noted that "Iran calls on the

Security Council to strongly condemn these abhorrent terrorist acts and to take appropriate measures in alignment with its steadfast commitment to combating terrorism in all its forms and manifestations."

Here is the full text of the Iranian envoy's letter:

I am writing to inform you of yet another appalling and cowardly terrorist attack on my homeland, the Islamic Republic of Iran. This horrific attack occurred merely two days after the reprehensible and despicable terrorist attack carried out by the Israeli regime on the diplomatic premises of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Damascus, the Syrian Arab Republic.

In the late hours of Wednesday, 3 April 2024, the foreign-backed terrorist group, Jaish al-Adl, perpetrated a series of coordinated attacks in the cities of Chabahar and Rask, situated in the province of Sistan and Baluchistan. Driven by malevolent intentions to disrupt peace and stability, the assailants targeted five pivotal public places, military bases, and security control centers, taking numerous civilians hostage. However, despite their sinister motives, the swift and courageous response of Iranian security forces and law enforcement thwarted their attempts to seize control of the military and security headquarters in Chabahar and Rask. During the anti-terrorist operations led by Iranian security forces, all hostages were successfully released. Sadly, these despicable acts of terror claimed the lives of ten brave police officers and security personnel, who sacrificed themselves in defense of our nation. Several others sustained injuries in the line of duty. Furthermore, 44 civilians were wounded in the attacks. Among them, 29 have received treatment and been discharged, while 15 individuals remain under medical care at Chabahar Hospital.

The Islamic Republic of Iran strongly condemns such abhorrent and atrocious acts of terrorism and underscores its unwavering commitment to ensure that those responsible are brought to justice and held accountable.

Given the enduring record of violence and terrorist acts perpetrated by Jaish al-Adl, the foreign-backed terrorist group, against innocent Iranian civilians and law enforcement personnel, the Islamic Republic of Iran calls on the Security Council to strongly condemn these abhorrent terrorist acts and to take appropriate measures in alignment with its steadfast commitment to combating terrorism in all its forms and manifestations as demonstrated by the Security Council's resolute unity and position in the press statement dated 16 December 2023 (SC/15534).

The Islamic Republic of Iran, which has directly suffered the catastrophic consequences of terrorism, remains steadfast in its unwavering commitment to spearheading the fight against this scourge. We are determined to protect the illustrious and noble people of

Iran and safeguard the security of neighboring nations from the perils posed by such malevolent terrorist groups.

I should be grateful if you would circulate the present letter as a document of the Security Council and the General Assembly, under agenda item 109 entitled “Measures to eliminate international terrorism.”

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 4-4-2024

Senate results

Now that the Senate polls are done minus KP, the elections for the Senate chairman and deputy chairman are on the cards

There were no surprises on Tuesday when the ruling coalition swept the Senate polls as expected. The PPP took the lead with 11 seats while the PML-N came in second with six seats while MQM-P and independent candidate Faisal Vawda secured one seat each. The polling for the 19 vacant seats was held in the national, Punjab, and Sindh assemblies while elections on 11 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s seats were postponed by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) over the ‘denial’ of oath-taking to the lawmakers elected on reserved seats. Now that the Senate polls are done minus KP, the elections for the Senate chairman and deputy chairman are on the cards. President Asif Zardari has appointed Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar as the presiding officer to conduct the election for the chairman and deputy chairman of the Senate.

This may not all be smooth sailing though. There is a quite potent argument that the Senate is incomplete without the KP component. That would make sense given that the electoral college for the chairman and deputy chairman election is supposed to be the Senate in its entirety – not part of the Senate. The other view is that after the Senate polls in three out of four provinces, the Senate is duly constituted and the election of the chairman and deputy chairman has to take place in the upper house’s first meeting after its new members take oath. It may be tempting to then read the KP government putting hurdles in the way of the reserved seats oath as its way of causing issues in the election of a new Senate chairman and deputy chairman. This tactic may not work though since we saw much of the same when the PTI tried to argue that the constitutional election of the prime minister and president could not take place because the National Assembly was incomplete. With the Senate elections done, albeit incomplete, the fact is that both upper and lower houses of parliament now have the numbers to support the ruling coalition, which will get its candidates elected as chairman and deputy chairman of the Senate – and then it is on to legislative business. The controversy surrounding KP is another reminder of the reserved

seats fiasco, something even PTI members admit was a mistake of their own making. Whatever the complications, what we do not need at this moment is for legislation and governance to be on hold – regardless of any politics. Far too many signs point to how one party may just want all else to pause while it is not in power. There is no denying the controversial nature of the 2024 elections, as was the case in 2018. There is no denying that there are matters in our courts that need to now be seen on an almost emergency level. But there is also no denying that disruptive politics will not get us anywhere. From not holding its intraparty elections which led to the bat symbol being taken away to its decision to merge with the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) that didn’t even contest the general elections and never submitted a list for reserved seats, the PTI seems to not care much for legalities. Here is the fact: once the Senate chairman and deputy chairman are elected, the government will start to go about its legislative business as usual. Whatever the reason and however things go, it is hoped that the government and the opposition are able to sort out their differences so people can take a breather from the uncertainty that has hounded this country for over two years now. The country, its people, its economy, and its politics – everyone really needs a break.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 13-4-2024

Opposition alliance to launch countrywide drive

Saleem Shahid

• *Protests under ‘Tehreek Tahafuz Ayeen-i-Pakistan’ umbrella to begin from Balochistan today*

• *Achakzai chosen to lead bloc including PTI, BNP-M, JI, PkMAP, MWM*

QUETTA: After a late-night sitting that continued till the early hours of Saturday morning, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) Secretary General Omar Ayub Khan announced a countrywide movement for the rule of law by a coalition of six opposition parties, under the banner of Tehreek Tahafuz Ayeen-i-Pakistan (TTAP).

The movement will not only hold public meetings, starting from Pishin today (on Saturday), but also engage bar associations, university students and other parties for mustering their support for the campaign against the PML-N-led coalition government.

The PTI secretary general said that Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP) chairman Mehmood Khan Achakzai was nominated as president of the six parties’ alliance with consensus of the leadership of opposition parties at the hours-long meeting, which was presided over by BNP-M chief Sardar Akhtar Mengal.

He said the movement was being launched against alleged massive rigging in the February 8 elections, with an aim to protect the constitution and resorting rule of law. The alliance rejected the 'government' established by tampering with the election result.

Besides the PTI secretary general, Mr Mengal and Mr Achakzai, Sunni Ittehad Council chairman Sahibzada Hamid Raza Khan, Majlis Wahdat Muslimeen Chairman Raja Nasir Abbas and Jamaat-i-Islami leader Liaquat Baloch also attended the meeting.

Mr Ayub said the meeting rejected increase in gas and electricity rates, which made it difficult for the people to earn their livelihoods. "All political parties have joined the opposition alliance of their own will in view of the deteriorating situation in all fields," he said.

Addressing the press conference, Mr Achakzai said, "None of us is against the army. We have objections to its political role." He said none of the allies had breached the constitution.

"The Constitution is a social contract and we will start public meetings from Saturday for its protection," Mr Achakzai said. He also believed there should be no extension in the service of any civil and military officer.

JI's Liaquat Baloch said the people had been pushed against the wall as their mandate was not being accepted. He said, "I agree with the decision and announcement of the alliance meeting and we will give our stance after the meeting of Jamaat's Shura."

Allama Raja Nasir Abbas said that with the support of the masses, they would struggle for the rule of law.

At an earlier presser, the PTI secretary general had announced a public meeting in Pishin on Saturday (today), which will be addressed by the leaders of all the six opposition parties.

Mr Ayub said the protest movement would be initiated from Balochistan and later expanded to other parts of the country.

JUI-F inclusion? In response to a question about the potential involvement of JUI-F in the protest movement, Mr Ayub said the matter would be discussed further in upcoming meetings of the alliance. He criticised the election results which he claimed originally showed PTI securing 180 seats in the National Assembly, a victory he said was overturned by manipulations involving Form 47, an official electoral document. "Our protest will continue until the peoples' mandate is restored in

PTI's favour," he said. The PTI leader slammed the current administration under President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, labelling them as products of Form 47. He said their government did not represent the people of the country as "they have rejected the parties sitting in the government".

Mr Ayub expressed concerns about Pakistan's deteriorating investment climate and increasing unemployment and attributed these to the lack of rule of law. He highlighted the need to restore investor confidence through legal and constitutional reforms. "Investment will come when there is a rule of law," he said. He said the PTI was not allowed to hold election meetings. "Our leader was sent to jail on false cases, but they failed to keep the people from supporting Imran Khan," he said. Mr Ayub emphasised PTI's commitment to regional development, particularly in Balochistan, where the party had previously initiated substantial projects. He lamented that these initiatives have stalled since the "regime change", a reference to Imran Khan's April 2022 ouster.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 8-4-2024

CPC launches education campaign on Party discipline

BEIJING, April 7 (Xinhua) -- The General Office of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee has issued a circular to launch a Party-wide campaign on CPC discipline education.

During the campaign, running from April to July, CPC members will be studying the newly revised Party regulations on disciplinary action, to strengthen their discipline awareness and always remain loyal, clean and responsible, according to the circular.

Stressing that the education should focus on integrating into everyday work and be consistently implemented, the circular urges discussions among Party members on the study, as well as efforts to use typical violation cases as cautionary lessons so that Party members will understand the bottom line and respect the rules.

The circular also calls on Party committees at all levels to meticulously carry out the education, and warns against pointless formalities.

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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 13-4-2024
GDP growth may slow to 6.1% in 2024:
Moody's

ENS Economic Bureau

India's economy will likely grow 6.1% in 2024, lower than 7.7% in 2023, Moody's Analytics on Friday projected, adding that inflation outlook remained more uncertain.

Looking at GDP relative to its trajectory prior to the Covid-19 pandemic showed that India and Southeast Asia have seen some of the largest output losses worldwide and are only beginning to recover, Moody's Analytics said in its report titled 'APAC Outlook: Listening Through the Noise'.

"Output in India remains 4% lower than it would have been without the pandemic and its various aftershocks—from supply snags to military conflicts abroad. Things are worse in ASEAN, where GDP is 6% below pre-pandemic projections. This compares with an output loss of about 2% for the world economy as a whole," it said.

"We expect India's GDP to grow 6.1% in 2024 after 7.7% last year."

Moody's Analytics said the inflation outlooks for China and India, Asia's two largest economies, are more uncertain. "Inflation in India is at the opposite extreme, with recent consumer price inflation rates hovering around 5%, close to the upper end of the Reserve Bank of India's target range of 2% to 6% and without clear evidence of a trend towards slowing price pressures," it said.

India's retail inflation declined to a five-month low of 4.85% in March mainly due to cooling food prices, according to official data released on Friday.

In its report, Moody's Analytics said the region overall is doing better than other parts of the world. The APAC (Asia Pacific) economy will grow 3.8% this year, which compares with a growth of 2.5% for the world economy, it said.

The Reserve Bank recently said food price uncertainties continue to weigh on the inflation trajectory going forward, and retained 4.5% retail inflation projection for 2024-25.

Continuing geopolitical tensions also pose upside risk to commodity prices and supply chains, RBI said.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 15-4-2024
Inflation moderating, but can't discount
risks ahead

Inflation management is a battle policymakers are more likely to lose because of climate or geopolitical shocks than textbook demand-supply imbalances.

At 4.9% in March compared to 5.1% in February, the retail inflation elephant, to use RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das's analogy, continues to walk towards the forest. The core inflation print—the non-food non-

fuel part of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) basket—is among the lowest it has ever been. That these numbers are accompanied by a strong growth momentum suggests that overheating is the least of the Indian economy's concerns, and there could very well be a situation w

This is as good as it gets for an economy. And yet, there are reasons for concern. Food inflation, as this newspaper argued improvising on Das's analogy, is the rogue elephant in the herd of (inflation) elephants. Prices of cereals, pulses and vegetables continue to rise at worrying rates. Making matters worse, monetary policy doesn't even have a weapon in its arsenal to bring down food prices. It is this asymmetry between policy objectives and instruments that has forced RBI to retain its hawkish tone and delay interest rate cuts.

The situation might get worse from here. The escalation in conflict between Iran and Israel could seriously disrupt commodity markets, especially for crude oil. Brent crude prices have already climbed by more than \$5 per barrel over the last month. Unlike food markets, the government will have much less leeway on price control if oil markets get a shock. This is what makes inflation management tricky. It's a battle policymakers are more likely to lose because of climate or geopolitical shocks than textbook demand-supply imbalances.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 4-4-2024
Despite ban, India allows onion export
to five nations

Zia Haq

India has allowed onion exports to a few countries on priority in response to diplomatic requests, an official said

India has allowed onion exports to a few countries on priority in response to diplomatic requests, but the world's largest exporter of the item will continue to ban overseas shipments amid projections of lower output for two years in a row, an official said on Wednesday.

The export ban imposed in December 2023 came on the back of a domestic supply crunch and after a 40% export tax failed to cool prices, which had more than doubled to reach ₹100 a kilo in some cities.

The Union government has allowed the export of 50,000 tonnes of onion to Bangladesh and 550 tonnes to Bhutan, apart from 3,000 tonnes to Bahrain, 1,200 tonnes to Mauritius and 14,400 tonnes to the UAE, the official said.

"These countries traditionally depend on India for part of their onion supplies and some of them are our immediate neighbours. So, they get priority," the official cited above said.

India is expected to harvest 19.3 million tonnes of rabi or winter-grown onions during 2023-24, which is about 18% lower than the production of 23.6 million tonnes in the previous season, according to official projections.

Rabi or winter-harvested onion is critical for country's availability as it contributes 72-75% of India's annual production. It is also crucial for ensuring year-round availability as it has a better shelf life compared to kharif or summer onion, and therefore can be stored for supplies till November-December.

Onion is a highly volatile commodity whose supplies tend to run low during an annual summer lean season. Since the bulb is the base ingredient of most Indian dishes and therefore widely consumed, consumers are quite sensitive to a rise in onion prices, relative to many other commodities.

The Union government has also started procuring onions from farmers, beginning April 1, at market rates to build an emergency reserve of 500,000 tonnes for 2024-25. The buffer will be used to ramp up supplies and keep prices stable, according to an official of the consumer affairs ministry.

"The Union government has directed two state-backed food agencies – the NCCF and NAFED -- to initiate procurement of 5 lakh tonnes of onion for the buffer requirement directly from the farmers as the rabi-2024 harvest started arriving in the market," a second official said. Procurement refers to the government's purchases of farm produce for state-held reserves.

For the procurement, NAFED and NCCF will pre-register onion farmers to ensure that payments to the farmers are transferred to their bank accounts through direct benefit transfer, according to the government's directive.

The department of consumer affairs had, through NAFED and NCCF, purchased about 600,000 tonnes of onion during 2023-24 for the government's reserves. These agencies then intervened in retail markets, selling the vegetable at a subsidised price of ₹25, when market rates had more than doubled due to a supply crunch in 2023. The buffer currently has just about 20,000 tonnes and needs to be replenished.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-4-2024

India, Mauritius sign protocol to amend tax treaty

PTI

New Delhi, India and Mauritius have signed a protocol to amend the double taxation avoidance agreement (DTAA), which included a principal purpose test (PPT) to decide whether a foreign investor is eligible to claim treaty benefits.

Tax experts said a new article has been added to the protocol "Article 27B Entitlement to Benefits". The amended protocol was signed on March 7 and made public now. The introduction of the PPT aims to curtail tax avoidance by ensuring that treaty benefits are only granted for transactions with a bona fide purpose. Nangia Andersen India Chairman Rakesh Nangia said the amendment represents a move by India to align with

global efforts against treaty abuse, particularly under the BEPS Action 6 framework.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 15-4-2024

India inks deals with Brazil, Argentina for pulses import

Zia Haq

New Delhi India is diversifying its import of pulses to keep domestic prices stable by entering into long-term deals with Brazil and Argentina after several rounds of negotiations, two officials aware of the matter said.

The world's largest consumer and producer is expected to import over 20,000 tonne of black gram (urad) from Brazil for the first time and unspecified amounts of pigeon pea (tur) from Argentina to meet its domestic requirements.

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Retail inflation in pulses remains high, although it slowed to 17.71% in March compared to a rise of 18.9% in February, according to official data. Holding the repurchase rate steady, the Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy committee on April 6 highlighted how food price pressures "have been interrupting the ongoing disinflation process, posing challenges for the final descent of inflation to the target of 4%".

India's output of pulses dipped to 23.4 million tonne in 2023-24 from 26.1 million tonne a year ago, the agriculture ministry estimates.

"Affordability and availability are two big factors. The government has held several rounds of discussions with the South American nations, which have conducive weather to grow these varieties while their own requirements are not much," one of the officials said, seeking anonymity.

Pulses are the commonest source of protein for most Indians. A campaign by the central government to ramp up local production saw total output jump 37% since 2015-16, according to official figures, helping to cut costly imports. Yet, the country has to rely on foreign shipments to meet total demand.

India's requirement of black gram is solely met through imports from Myanmar under a memorandum of understanding between the two nations. Import of gram from the conflict-ridden neighbouring country stumbled last year, affecting local prices.

"Long-term deals with affordable alternative suppliers will help supply management greatly as it is a hedge against price volatility," a second official said, declining to be named.

In 2023, India imported nearly 3 million tonne of pulses, mostly lentils, black gram and pigeon pea, from Canada, Australia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Sudan, Malawi and Myanmar.

Rising protein prices can be a significant driver of household expenses. The federal government has imposed a slew of measures to tame prices ahead of a

general election to keep basic food commodities affordable. For instance, the government has waived off import duties for three varieties of pulses – pigeon pea, black gram and lentil (masoor) till March 2025 to boost local supplies.

Between 2004-05 and 2013-14, pulses saw a price spike of 143%, stoked by global prices and rising protein demand due to better purchasing power, according to a Reserve Bank paper by the late former deputy governor Subir Gokarn. He calculated that many Indians had crossed an income threshold beyond which protein intake such as pulses, eggs and meat increases.

Overall, the output of pulses as a group, at 27.5 million tonne in 2022-23, was slightly higher than the previous year's production of 27.3 million tonne. A campaign to distribute improved seeds raised pulses productivity by 34.8%, from 727 kg per hectare in 2018-19 to 980 kg a hectare in 2021-22, agriculture ministry's data show.

The gains can be fragile though. Increasing weather uncertainties can quickly firm up prices if output drops. Prices of pigeon pea and black gram have been elevated because of a patchy monsoon last year in rain-fed growing belts in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

"Pulses will continue to be a source of inflation due to lower output. That's why you can expect multiple measures from the government, including imposition of stock limits," said Abhishek Agrawal, an analyst with Comtrade.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-4-2024 **India, Mauritius sign protocol to amend tax treaty**

PTI

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THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 3-4-2024 **BD economy to grow below 6pc for two consecutive years: WB**

Business Correspondent

'The World Bank (WB) said even though political uncertainty has diminished with a new cabinet taking

oath after the national elections held in January 2024, downside risks to the outlook are significant.

Bangladesh real GDP growth is projected to remain relatively subdued at 5.6 percent in the current fiscal year, compared to the average annual growth rate of 6.6 percent over the decade preceding the Covid-19 pandemic, the World Bank (WB) said on Tuesday.

Relatively slower growth is projected to persist in the next fiscal year of 2024-25, at 5.7 percent, driven by a modest recovery in private consumption supported by a moderation in inflation, said the Washington-based lender in its Bangladesh Development Update. "Investment recovery will need support from improved implementation of large public investment projects."

The WB said persistent inflation is expected to weigh on private consumption growth, and shortages of energy and imported inputs combined with rising interest rates and financial sector vulnerabilities are expected to dampen investor sentiment.

On the supply side, this will be reflected in higher industrial growth, even though services growth is expected to remain subdued.

"Growth is expected to increase gradually over the medium-term as monetary, exchange rate, financial and structural reforms are implemented."

The WB said even though political uncertainty has diminished with a new cabinet taking oath after the national elections held in January 2024, downside risks to the outlook are significant.

"Inadequate progress in monetary and exchange rate reforms may result in a further decline in foreign exchange reserves and persistent inflationary pressure."

Tighter liquidity conditions could exacerbate vulnerabilities in the banking sector. Fiscal risks include a revenue shortfall, potential financial sector fiscal liabilities, and deficit monetisation, it said.

"Expediting structural reforms are needed to promote economic diversification and integration into Global Value Chains (GVCs) and strengthen resilience over the medium to long term. Critical reforms include developing the intellectual property rights (IPR) regime and strengthening the framework for foreign direct investment."

An efficient resolution framework for non-performing loans (NPLs) is urgently needed, the WB said.

In this regard, it said, conducting a comprehensive asset quality review of the largest banks, establishing legal frameworks for the creation of an NPL market, strengthening corporate governance of the state-owned commercial banks, and efficiently implementing regulations such as the Prompt Corrective Action framework for weak banks are crucial steps.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 5-4-2024**Per capita foreign debt rises to
Tk 150,000: CPD**

In the span of three years, the per capita foreign debt of Bangladesh has increased from Tk 100,000 to Tk 150,000, according to the private research organisation Centre for Policy Dialogue or CPD.

Bangladesh's foreign debt and repayment obligations are increasing, the think tank revealed in a discussion - Bangladesh's External Public Borrowings and Debt Servicing Capacity: Are There Reasons for Concern?

organised jointly by CPD and Asia Foundation. Debapriya Bhattacharya, CPD distinguished fellow, said 70 percent of the development projects have been taken to build infrastructures, leading to a "collapse" of the sector-based development system.

A single group benefited from the project, he said, "In the last decade and a half, the government has done many mega projects with loans. It has not worked for the development of everyone. Rather, maternal and child mortality has increased. Food insecurity has increased. Despite the increase in loans, the investment environment has not improved."

He also fears that organisations or individuals associated with mega projects may be involved in money laundering abroad.

Mostafizur Rahman, another distinguished fellow, said: "Actually, we are re-borrowing to repay a large part of our government and publicly guaranteed debt obligations."

"There's no alternative but to speed up domestic resource collection.

Mostafizur Rahman said that the rate of foreign debt and debt repayment obligation has increased in recent years.

At the end of June 2023, the public and private foreign debt of Bangladesh was \$98.9 billion, which exceeded \$100 billion last September, according to him.

Although the foreign debt to GDP ratio of 21.6 percent is "relatively not so high", he said, "The ability to repay the debt is very important."

The formation of the loan portfolio is also changing rapidly while credit conditions are also becoming tighter, especially when compared to GDP, revenue, exports, remittances and foreign exchange reserves, he observed.

"The rapid increase in foreign debt and debt repayment liabilities may become a worrying factor in the economy."

Mostafizur noted that Bangladesh's GDP to revenue ratio is one of the lowest in the world.

With this, debt carrying capacity and debt repayment capacity have created concerns. At the end of the day, domestic resource accumulation is important, which has to be considered for repayment of both domestic and foreign debts." —bdnews24.com

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 3-4-2024**Exports surpass \$5b for 4th consecutive
month**

Bangladesh exported goods worth US \$5.10 billion in March 2024, showing a growth of 9.88 per cent year-on-year.

According to the data released by the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) on Tuesday, Bangladesh's exports gained over \$5 billion in the last four consecutive months.

In the current fiscal year 2023-24, Bangladesh exported goods worth \$43.55 billion in nine months. This export earning saw 4.39 percent growth compared with the same period of the last fiscal year. According to the EPB data, exports of ready-made garments, agro-processed products, and plastic products have increased so far in the current fiscal year. On the other hand, exports of leather and leather products, jute and jute products, home textiles, and engineering products have declined.

As a result, the growth rate of overall product exports is slightly lower.

From July to March of FY24, ready-made garments worth \$37.20 billion have been exported. This export is 5.53 percent more than the same period last year. Apart from this, leather and leather products worth \$790 million have been exported. This export is 13.65 percent less than the same period of the last fiscal year.

In the last fiscal year (2022-23), a total of \$55.56 billion worth of products were exported. In the current financial year, the government has set a target of \$60 billion for the export of goods.

However, despite the growth of exports in recent months, at the end of March, the export of goods it was 5.86 percent behind the target. — UNB

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 3-4-2024**WB hails tremendous progress in SL**

Predicts 2.2% economic growth for 2024

Shirajiv Sirimane

The World Bank said that Sri Lanka's economy is making tremendous progress and the country from a negative growth rate a few months ago will stamp a positive 2.2% growth in the entire year of 2024.

"This will then stabilise to 3% from 2025 onwards and we see implementation of reforms as the key to this positive momentum which should continue in the future as well," said Senior World Bank Economist Richard Miller in Colombo yesterday.

He also said that increase in remittances, tourist arrivals and increase of donor funds too played a key role towards this recovery.

He recalled that the country has made great progress when it comes to increasing reserves from around US\$ 300 million which was sufficient for one week of purchases to over US\$ 3.5 billion in nine months and similarly reducing the inflation from one of the world's

highest 70% to less than 5% during the same time frame.

“In addition, interest rates too have drastically come down while the Sri Lankan Rupee has stabilised.

“While the reform process must continue more steps should be taken towards state owned enterprise reforms, reducing corruption and mainly addressing poverty that is increasing,” World Bank’s Country Manager for Maldives and Sri Lanka, Chiyo Kanda said.

“Steps should also be taken to reduce income inequality and labour market concerns.

While releasing the Sri Lanka Development Update, Bridge to Recovery, report World Bank Country Director for Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka Faris Hadad-Zervos said: “Sri Lanka’s economy is on the road to recovery, but sustained efforts to mitigate the impact of the economic crisis on the poor and vulnerable are critical, alongside a continuation of the path of robust and credible structural reforms.”

“This involves a two-pronged strategy: first, to maintain reforms that contribute to macroeconomic stability and second, to accelerate reforms to stimulate private investment and capital inflows, which are crucial for economic growth and poverty reduction.”

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 3-4-2024

South Asia fastest developing region in the world

SL’s economy on road to recovery – World Bank

Shirajiv Sirimane

Sri Lanka’s economy is on the road to recovery, but sustained efforts to mitigate the impact of the economic crisis on the poor and vulnerable are critical, alongside a continuation of the path of robust and credible structural reforms said World Bank Country Director for Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka Faris Hadad-Zervos

While releasing the Sri Lanka Development Update, Bridge to Recovery, report he added that this involves a two-pronged strategy: first, to maintain reforms that contribute to macroeconomic stability and second, to accelerate reforms to stimulate private investment and capital inflows, which are crucial for economic growth and poverty reduction. Looking forward, the report projects a modest pickup in growth of 3% in 2025, with a gradual increase in inflation and a small current account surplus. However, high debt service obligations are expected to exert pressure on fiscal balances.

Poverty rates are anticipated to remain above 22% until 2026. Risks to the outlook remain, particularly related to inadequate debt restructuring, reversal of reforms, financial sector vulnerabilities, and the enduring impact of the crisis. The report emphasizes that strong reform implementation will be fundamental to fostering a

resilient economy through continued macro-fiscal-financial stability, greater private sector investment, and addressing risks associated with state-owned enterprises.

The April 2024 edition, Jobs for Resilience, edition also said that South Asia is the fastest growing region in the world and for this India’s growth is the key. World Bank’s Country Manager for Maldives and Sri Lanka, Chiyo Kanda said that the region faces the highest climate change vulnerabilities and the farms are mostly affected by it. Since most of the region’s governments have debt and other priorities it’s the private sector that has to take a lead towards reducing this threat.”

“This report projects South Asia to remain the fastest-growing region in the world, with growth projected to be 6% in 2024 – driven mainly by robust growth in India and recoveries in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. But this strong outlook is deceptive,” says the report. For most countries, growth is still below pre-pandemic levels and is reliant on public spending. At the same time, private investment growth has slowed sharply in all South Asian countries and the region is not creating enough jobs to keep pace with its rapidly increasing working-age population.”

The report recommends a range of policies to spur firm growth and boost employment as well as help lift growth and productivity and free up space for public investments in climate adaptation.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 3-4-2024

Cabinet nod to import buses, vans for tourism sector

Approval to import 750 vans, 250 buses without tax relief

Ishara Mudugamuwa

The government has taken measures to import vehicles required for the tourism industry especially for the transportation of tourists, Transport, Highways and Mass Media Minister and Cabinet Spokesman Dr. Bandula Gunawardhana said.

He was speaking at the weekly Cabinet media briefing held yesterday at the Government Information Department. Accordingly, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the proposal furnished by the Tourism and Lands Minister to import 750 vans with a seating capacity of 6 to 15 (electric and hybrid) and 250 buses with seating capacity from 6 to 30 which are small buses and larger buses with seating capacity of 30 to 45 for tourist transport without any special tax relief.

Although it is expected that vehicles engaged in the tourism industry for transportation of tourists should be less than six years old, it is apparent that the condition of the vehicles presently used for the transport of tourists are not satisfactory and as a result the fame

earned by Sri Lanka as a prominent tourist destination is being tarnished.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 7-4-2024

Sri Lanka and Oman sign MoU to enhance tourism

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed in Colombo, between the Government of the Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, and the Sri Lanka Government, represented by the Ministry of Tourism and Lands, to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the tourism sector between the two countries.

It underscores the significance of the tourism industry as a key driver of economic development. The memorandum aims to intensify tourism exchanges, promote participation in various tourism activities and coordinate efforts among relevant authorities in both countries. It also seeks to bolster cooperation in areas such as investments, tourist facility management, and private sector involvement in tourism development. This includes coordinating marketing and promotional campaigns, promoting tours between the two countries, exchanging tourism expertise and enhancing technical knowledge of training and qualification in the field.

The agreement was signed by Ahmed Ali Said Al Rashdi, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman and Minister of Tourism and Lands Harin Fernando.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 7-4-2024

Sri Lanka Tourism conducts road shows in Australia

The Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau conducted three road shows in Australia recently.

The inaugural event took place in Brisbane on March 19. High Commissioner of Sri Lanka to Australia Chitranganie Wagiswara, Sri Lanka's Consul General in Melbourne, Sandith Samarasinghe, and Chairman of Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB), Chalaka Gajabahu and SLTPB officials were present.

Thirty-two Sri Lankan companies participated alongside sixty Australian travel and tour operators and Australian media personnel.

These road shows serve as vital platforms for development partnerships and enhancing collaborations between Sri Lankan businesses and their Australian counterparts.

They play a pivotal role in revitalising the tourism sector in Sri Lanka by stimulating interest and engagement from Australian markets.

On March 21, Sri Lanka Tourism held its second roadshow at the Shangri-La Hotel in Sydney. Over 75

representatives of Australian travel trade companies and 25 media representatives and influencers were present., Sri Lankan Airlines Manager for Sydney, Sakura Wijethunga was also present.

The event featured a dance performance, adding colour and liveliness to the proceedings.

A raffle draw was also conducted, offering attendees the chance to win prizes, including six nights and seven days' tour packages from Sri Lankan travel trade, and three complimentary air tickets from Sri Lankan Airlines. This was one item where the participants joined in enthusiastically.

Overall, the roadshow served as a platform for fostering collaboration and promoting Sri Lanka as a premier tourist destination among the Australian travelers.

The conclusion of the series of Roadshows in Australia took place at the Sofitel Hotel in Melbourne. With over 50 Australian agents and 35 media representatives, the event was a testament to the growing interest in Sri Lanka's tourism offerings.

The day commenced with productive B2B meetings, facilitating valuable connections between Australian and Sri Lankan businesses. The highlight of the event was the address by Sri Lanka Tourism Ambassador Sanath Jayasuriya.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 12-4-2024

Nepal to grow by 3.6 percent in 2023-24, ADB says

The report projects annual average inflation to slide to 6.5 percent in the current fiscal year, ending mid-July, from 7.7 percent in the last fiscal year.

Post Report

KATHMANDU, Nepal's economy is anticipated to grow by 3.6 percent in the current fiscal year, up from 1.9 percent growth in the last fiscal year, according to the Asian Development Outlook, released on Thursday.

The projection made by the Asian Development Bank is higher than the World Bank's estimation of 3.3 percent made a week ago.

"A gradual relaxation of monetary policy coupled with improved consumer and investor confidence is expected to stimulate economic activity in the current fiscal year," ADB Country Director for Nepal Arnaud Cauchois.

"Moreover, industry is projected to grow more rapidly than in the last fiscal year as capital spending by the government ramps up in the second half of the fiscal year, and as additional hydroelectricity power comes online by the end of this fiscal year."

Manbar Singh Khadka, Senior Economics Officer at the Asian Development Bank, said that energy would be the key thrust as the country will add 900 MW of electricity

to the grid by the end of the fiscal year. “Besides this, low-interest rates would boost the demand for credit, and growing tourism activities will stimulate economic activities.”

According to the Nepal Tourism Board, the country’s tourism promotional body, the arrival numbers crossed the million mark in 2023, the first time in four years. This is the third instance that Nepal has received over a million tourists.

“The luxury hotel building spree will create jobs demand,” said Khadka.

He said that construction and manufacturing sectors that have stalled would pick up pace.

The agriculture sector may increase marginally from 2.7 percent in the last fiscal year to 2.8 percent this fiscal year as a record paddy harvest is tempered by a shortfall in winter crops and other agricultural production, given the deficient rainfall this winter.

The report projects annual average inflation to fall to 6.5 percent in 2023-24 from 7.7 percent in 2022-23 on subdued oil prices and a decline in inflation in India, Nepal’s main import source.

The report said that the lingering weakness in domestic demand that continued in the first quarter of this fiscal year will gradually dissipate in the remainder of the fiscal year as government investment outlays accelerate.

Private consumption expenditure will rise as remittance inflow strengthens and prices moderate, while private investment expenditure will expand on monetary easing and financial sector reforms encouraging term loans.

After contracting by 20.2 percent in the last fiscal year and a slow start in the current fiscal year, public investment is expected to expand by 1.5 percent under the 2023-24 budget as development projects are implemented.

Overall fiscal policy will support growth despite the deficit being slated to decline to about 3 percent of the GDP from 6.1 percent in the last fiscal year. The report said that exports would rise on higher electricity exports as Nepal continues to expand its production and transmission infrastructure.

However, merchandise imports, particularly of capital goods, will rise as capital expenditure ramps up, and service imports will rise on higher transport payments and travel costs for Nepalis going abroad. On balance, net exports will subtract from growth.

The ADB said that external risks remain relatively well contained. The current account deficit may fall again into deficit after registering a surplus in the first half of 2023-24.

As the trade deficit contracted by 4.7 percent year-on-year in the first half of the current fiscal year, and as workers’ remittances expanded by 22.6 percent year-on-year, the current account recorded a surplus of \$1.2

billion. However, amid higher imports and stable remittance inflows in the remainder of the fiscal year, the 2023-24 current account deficit is forecast at 0.7 percent of the GDP.

“Downside risks to the economic outlook in 2023-24 may arise from a downturn in the global economy affecting Nepal’s tourism and remittance receipts,” said ADB Principal Economist for Nepal Jan Hansen.

Any intensified geopolitical turmoil could disrupt supply chains, pushing up global inflation and tightening global financial conditions. This may lead to a tightening of domestic monetary policy, undermining investment and consumption, and dragging down growth.

A downturn in the global economy would affect Nepal’s tourism and remittance receipts, the bank said.

Delays in the implementation of public projects could weigh heavily on growth as well. As Nepal is always at high risk from natural hazards, catastrophes can substantially reduce economic growth, according to the report.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 5-4-2024

Nepal’s financial odyssey

We should negotiate double taxation avoidance with countries that have investors with deep bond pockets.

Shabda Gyawali & Pragres Acharya

In the first part of this article, titled “Tapping into foreign debt markets”, published on March 28, we highlighted the necessity of tapping into foreign debt markets to secure funding for Nepal’s energy ambitions. We delved into the obstacles of needing an issuance history. In this piece, we lay out the strategies for initiating the pivotal first step, while also addressing the elephant in the room: Will the rise in commercial foreign public debt and private sector bond borrowing, influenced by the country’s credit rating, exhaust foreign currency reserves or plunge the nation into a debt trap?

Looming concern

As the fresh memories of the Sri Lankan crisis loom large, this concern becomes even more straightforward when we consider that the total payments on a loan will always exceed the amount received due to interest. However, loans are inherently neither good nor bad—their value lies in how they are utilised. All is well if the income generated from borrowed funds surpasses the repayment cost. This principle applies to nations and individual businesses alike. Yet there’s an additional consideration to foreign currency borrowing—we must ensure the availability of enough foreign currency. Simply put, paying in dollars while earning in the Nepali currency may not be sustainable. While individual businesses needn’t fret, it’s the aggregate

surplus that matters. Fortunately, the export potential of renewable energy alleviates the concerns in this case.

With that matter addressed, let's focus on resolving the obstacles hindering Nepal's entry into international bond finance.

The perceived high investment risk in Nepal and the absence or potential lowness of credit ratings could result in either a lack of interest in lending by international bond investors or inflated pricing. However, there's a silver lining: Guarantees stepping in as the cavalry. These guarantees may originate from development finance institutions or other guarantee-providing entities involved in the issuance process. However, this peace of mind comes with a price tag. Therefore, the issuer must strike a delicate balance between the higher coupon payments due to perceived higher risk and the premium paid for the issuance.

Pooling together smaller hydroelectric projects to create a larger issuance could provide an initial step in establishing a track record for bond issuance in Nepal. This diversified pool helps mitigate overall default risk. These initial steps mustn't be overly radical, as building a yield curve requires careful progression.

The government guarantee mentioned earlier is essential for the Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs). It can be incorporated while signing the PPA with Project Development Agreements (PDAs). While similar guarantees are already commonplace in PDAs for large hydroelectric projects, extending such provisions to smaller projects is essential.

To make the first step even more cushioned, initial issuances can focus on refinancing operating hydropower. The construction risk associated with greenfield projects may be too significant and so can drive the price of bonds higher. This enables the experienced local Nepali lenders to undertake new projects with freed-up funds.

In such cases, traditional PDAs may not be suitable for the projects already developed. Regardless of the terminology, implementing the guarantees—whether through addendums to PPAs or government letters—is necessary. The government should explore offering these facilities on a conditional basis to facilitate projects and funds to proceed with bond raising. It's crucial to avoid the pitfall of requiring international bond financing as a prerequisite, thus preventing a "chicken versus egg" dilemma.

Nepal should consider blending finances at the source or issuing multiple tranches, provided they're sizable enough to attract investors. This will bring the costs down. International development finance institutions (DFIs) or the Nepal Government could opt for junior equity-esque tranches. Alternatively, the government could proactively establish mechanisms to procure such capital, given Nepal's lag in leveraging blended finance.

In 2023, Nepal participated in only seven out of 167 transactions worth \$23.5 billion, surpassing only Afghanistan and Bhutan.

Currencies

Let's now delve into the realm of currencies. On average, the Nepali Rupee (NPR) has depreciated by 3 percent annually against the dollar. For international bond raises, the deepest currency is generally the US dollar. We need development finance institutions and multilateral development banks (MDBs) to offer products and programmes with concessional exchange rate guarantees, especially for developing nations like Nepal grappling with currency depreciation. After all, currency depreciation isn't unique to Nepali rupee alone.

In the short term, we can focus on INR-denominated issuances. With India's recent inclusion in the GBI-EM index, bond investors are drawn to the allure of INR exposure. In collaboration with the central bank, the government could implement mechanisms to mitigate de-pegging risks, thereby facilitating INR bond issuances from Nepal. Although the INR market is shallower than the USD, for now, this strategic move would circumvent the prohibitive costs associated with hedging against the US dollar in the case of USD issuances.

The high taxes (15 percent) deducted at source on the interest payments increase the price of the bonds. These taxes are baked into the interest rate as the lenders seek to ensure they earn their target return net of tax. Tax waivers on such bonds in the initial days will help lower the cost and start the momentum. DTAAAs could also be handy in such cases. The Nepal Government should proactively negotiate double taxation avoidance agreements (DTAAAs) with countries where investors with deep bond pockets are domiciled. However, to ensure the credibility of these agreements, Nepali tax authorities must consistently uphold existing DTAAAs signed with various nations.

Projects should explore opportunities to leverage the voluntary carbon credit market by claiming avoidance credits, albeit priced less favourably than removal credits. They can bolster the projects' ability to service bonds sustainably. This, in turn, improves their creditworthiness and reduces the default risk premium associated with bond issuance, making the bonds cheaper.

The projects and their developers should also strongly focus on meeting the Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) standards, especially for greenfield projects. International bond investors are unlikely to associate with projects that aren't environment-friendly or have weak governance structures. Such associations would defeat the purpose of green investing for international bond investors.

Supporting initial bond issuances will build momentum, making international bond markets more accessible in favour of Nepal and Nepali projects. Green bonds offer financing for an array of environment-friendly projects beyond energy, including waste management, pollution control and biodiversity conservation. However, due to the high demand for energy resources and growing interest in green investments, starting with energy sector issuances appears to be the logical first step.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 2-4-2024

USAID and Nepal Tourism Board launch 2024 International Tourism Campaign

Post Report

Kathmandu, Nepal Tourism Board and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have jointly launched the 2024 International Tourism Campaign, a collaborative effort between USAID and the Board, in partnership with Steller, a global travel-inspired storytelling platform.

“This campaign aims to showcase Nepal’s rich history, cultural diversity, and abundant tourism opportunities to a global audience, building upon the success of the 2023 campaign which reached over 16.3 million travelers and achieved \$15.8 million in earned media value,” the US Embassy in Nepal said in a statement on Monday. “In its second phase, the 2024 campaign will feature international content creators from Steller, who will capture the essence of Nepal through captivating videos and photos during their exploration of key destinations such as Kathmandu, Pokhara, Bardia, and Ilam.”

With an expected reach of over 20 million viewers, this initiative aims to stimulate tourist arrivals and position Nepal as a premier tourist destination, the embassy said.

Speaking at the event, the US Ambassador to Nepal Dean Thompson emphasised Nepal’s vast potential as a top-tier travel destination, citing its diverse landscapes, rich biodiversity, and vibrant cultures.

“Expressing USAID’s unwavering support for Nepal’s tourism sector, he underscored the pivotal role of tourism in advancing inclusive, sustainable economic growth,” read the statement.

Echoing this sentiment, Nandini Lahe Thapa, officiating CEO of the Nepal Tourism Board, highlighted Nepal’s “remarkable tourism growth”, with over 1 million international visitors in 2023.

According to her, the campaign is poised to sustain this upward trajectory by showcasing Nepal’s year-round tourism offerings and positioning the country as a preferred destination for global travelers.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 6-4-2024

Iran, Turkey hold talks to expand energy cooperation

TEHRAN - Iran and Turkey on Thursday expressed willingness to enhance cooperation in the energy sector, particularly in the gas industry, Shana reported.

During a meeting in Tehran, Iranian Oil Minister Javad Oji and Turkish Minister of Energy and Natural Resources Alparslan Bayraktar discussed the expansion of cooperation between Tehran and Ankara in the energy sector and boosting bilateral trade, the report said.

Oji voiced Iran's readiness to expand relations with Turkey in the oil industry's upstream and downstream sectors.

He said Iran welcomes Turkish companies' participation in projects of its oil industry.

Pointing to Turkish companies' willingness to be involved in Iran's upstream projects, particularly the development of oil fields, the official added that bilateral agreements and the \$30 billion annual trade target underlined by the two countries' presidents were also discussed during the meeting.

According to Oji, Bayraktar offered a list of Turkish companies, which are eager to engage in Iran's oil projects.

Several oil contracts worth more than \$33 billion have been recently signed with Iranian knowledge-based companies, said the oil minister, adding the energy sector can contribute largely to the achievement of Tehran-Ankara's \$30 billion trade target.

Further in the meeting, Bayraktar said his visit to Tehran reveals Turkey's firm determination to extend the contract on importing gas from Iran.

Gas plays a vital role in Turkey, as it meets the energy needs of a major part of the household, commercial, and industrial sectors of the country, he added.

“We are seeking to diversify our gas import routes,” pointed out the visiting energy minister, referring to Iran as one of the leading gas suppliers to Turkey.

The official pointed to Turkish companies' investment in development projects of Iran's gas fields and renovation of gas transmission infrastructure as one of the main topics he discussed with his Iranian counterpart.

The two sides will surely continue their talks, he concluded.

In 2001, Iran signed a 25-year gas export contract with its northwestern neighbor Turkey, which is set to expire in 2026.

On the sidelines of the meeting, Oji told reporters that negotiations officially started on Thursday between the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) and Turkish

state-owned BOTAS Petroleum Pipeline Corporation on technical issues related to the contract's renewal.

Speaking to reporters, the Turkish minister said his country was willing to extend the contract.

Bayraktar said their discussions had focused on Turkish firms' investment in the development of the Iranian gas fields and the renovation of Iran's gas transfer infrastructure.

EF

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 2-4-2024

Iran, Iraq extend gas export contract by 5 years

TEHRAN - Tehran and Baghdad have agreed to extend the contract on Iran's gas exports to Iraq for five years, Shana reported.

The extension of Iran's gas export contract to Iraq for five years was signed on March 27 between Iranian Deputy Oil Minister for Gas Affairs Majid Chegeni and Iraq's Minister of Electricity Ziad Ali Fazel, in Baghdad.

Speaking to the press on the sidelines of the signing ceremony, Chegeni said that Iran has exported about 52 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas to Iraq worth \$15 billion under two gas contracts since 2017.

Iraqi Electricity Minister Ziad Ali Fazel also said that Iraq has signed a five-year natural gas import contract with an Iranian company, noting that his country's power plants are in dire need of Iranian gas to generate electricity.

He noted that the experience of the past years has shown that Iran is a good economic partner for Iraq and has provided Iraq's needs in the most difficult conditions.

EF

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 15-4-2024

Iran's annual exports to India hit \$2.217 billion

TEHRAN - Iran has exported \$2.217 billion worth of goods to India during the past Iranian calendar year (ended on March 19), according to an official with Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO).

Hadi Talebian Moghaddam, the director of TPO department for Indian Subcontinent Affairs, said on Sunday that the figure shows a two percent increase in comparison to the \$2.175 billion reported in 2022.

Noting that Iran's balance of trade with India turned positive last year, he put Iran's last year's imports from India at \$1.916 billion.

India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry recently issued a report that put the country's trade exchanges with Iran in January at over \$200 million.

The figure is up three percent in comparison to that of January 2023 when bilateral exchanges stood at \$197 million.

The value of trade between Iran and India reached \$1.836 billion in 2023, according to India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The trade exchange between the two countries declined by 26 percent in 2023 compared to the previous year, the figure was reported to be \$2.499 billion in 2022.

According to the Indian Ministry data, Iran exported commodities valued at \$699 million to India during the past year, registering no significant change from 2022.

Petroleum products were the top goods imported by India from Iran in 2023, and India imported \$221 million worth of such products from Iran this year. The import of Iranian oil products by India in 2023 increased by 26 percent compared to the previous year.

Raw materials for dye production and various fruits were also among the top exported goods to India in 2023.

India's exports to Iran in January-December 2023 experienced a 35 percent decrease and reached \$1.187 billion. In the previous year, India had exported \$1.847 billion worth of goods to Iran.

Rice was the top export product of India to Iran in 2023. India's rice exports to Iran decreased by 34 percent in 2023, falling from \$1.98 billion in 2022 to \$723 million.

India's tea export to Iran also declined by almost a third, from \$86 million in 2022 to \$30 million in 2023. The country's fruit exports to Iran however increased by 14 percent and reached \$55 million and spice exports decreased by 28 percent to \$15 million.

EF

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 13-4-2024

Iran's trade with OIC member states hits \$61b

TEHRAN - The value of the trade exchanges between Iran and the other 56 member states of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) reached \$61 billion in the past Iranian calendar year (ended March 19, 2024), registering a 0.19 percent hike compared to a year earlier.

The head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) put the volume of the trade exchanges between Iran and OIC member states from March 21, 2023, to March 19, 2024, at 94 million tons, registering a 4.22 percent decline compared to the previous year.

Iran exported \$29 billion of products to these countries and imported \$32 billion worth of products from them, Mohammad Rezvanifar added, IRNA reported.

The deputy minister of economy went on to say that the country's export of products to the OIC members last year registered an 11 percent decline in value while the import of products from these countries increased 13 percent compared to a year earlier.

Among the OIC member states, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, Oman, Afghanistan, Malaysia and Indonesia were Iran's major trade partners, the IRICA chief added.

Back in May 2023, the former head of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) stressed the need for establishing a joint Islamic market among OIC members over the next 10 years.

Addressing a gathering of the heads of OIC member chambers of commerce on the sidelines of the "Russia - Islamic World: Kazan Forum 2023" in Russia, Gholam-Hossein Shafeie said: "An important issue that has been discussed a lot in the past and the organization should pay attention to it in the current situation is the creation of a common Islamic market in the next 10 years, which can be achieved by concluding a free trade agreement among Islamic countries and removing tariff and non-tariff barriers."

"Experts have worked on the Islamic market plan, and using the experiences and studies of these experts can definitely be a way forward," he added.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which was formed in 1972, today has reached a position where, according to statistics, the future of the world's energy would be in the hands of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Shafeie said in his speech.

EF

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 3-4-2024

Envoy calls on Pakistan, Iran to promote trade, tourism

Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD: Iranian Ambassador Dr Reza Amiri Moghadam on Friday called on Pakistan and Iran to use the existing capacities for promotion of trade and tourism as well as energy.

Speaking at an Iftar hosted by the embassy on Tuesday, which coincided with the Nowruz festival, the Iranian ambassador said despite the sanctions, both countries had witnessed progress and development in various fields, including economic, security and trade.

"Great progress has been made in various fields of cooperation including cultural, scientific, defence and security," Dr Moghadam said, adding that the opening of two official border crossings after 73 years had increased electricity export to Pakistan from 100MW to

more than 200MW. This, he added, was likely to increase to 500MW.

The ambassador said trade volume had reached \$2.5 billion, adding that capacities of the commonalities and links in various areas of history, civilisation, language, religion, geography and culture should be availed for sustainable development.

He went on to say that the propaganda machinery of some western-biased media was spreading disinformation, misinformation and mal-information about Iran and Pakistan. However, he lauded Pakistani media for their professionalism, engagement and ethics, and also paid tributes to those journalists who had sacrificed their lives while promoting justice, truth, peace and love around the world.

The gathering also observed silence in memory of media people who made great sacrifices in the war in Gaza and highlighted the crimes and genocidal acts being committed by the Zionist regime. The Iranian envoy said the Israeli regime was committing genocide and crimes against humanity in the Gaza Strip as a result of which thousands of innocent children, women and men had been martyred or injured while buildings and infrastructure in Gaza had been ruined.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 7-4-2024

Pakistan, Azerbaijan vow to work jointly to boost global climate action

By Staff Correspondent

Islamabad: The Ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Khazar Farhadov called upon the Secretary of the Ministry of Climate Change & Environmental Coordination Ezaz A. Dar at the Ministry, according to news released on Saturday.

The spokesperson for the Ministry Muhammad Saleem Shaikh said that during the meeting the Ambassador highlighted very close and brotherly relations between Azerbaijan and Pakistan, which date centuries back in history.

In turn, Ezaz A. Dar acknowledged the close ties between the people of the two countries and indicated that Pakistan is committed to further enhance the relationship with Azerbaijan, said the ministry spokesperson.

The Ambassador apprised that the Republic of Azerbaijan as host country, based on the efforts which were made at the UN-led annual global climate conference (COP28) held last year in Dubai towards the Global Climate Agenda, aspires to hold the conference in a manner that that helps in up-scaling global climate action and upcoming COP29 will build on the momentum from the Dubai climate conference and advance international community's collective cause in

Baku, and in the process set up Belem (COP30) for success.

The Azerbaijan's ambassador to Pakistan underlined during the meeting at the ministry that achieving significant results at COP29 will need a joint effort by all stakeholders, including countries, international organisations, international financial institutions and the private sector.

Meanwhile, the ambassador especially stressed that by the order of Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024 declared as the "Year of Solidarity for a Green World" in the Republic of Azerbaijan and hosting and pressing COP recognises Azerbaijan's endeavours in addressing climate change not only at national, but also at regional and global scales.

The Secretary, MoCC & EC assured the ambassador of all-out support in the successful organization, conduct and negotiations at the two-week long UN-led 29th session of the conference of the Parties set to kick off from November 11 this year at Baku, the climate change spokesperson told press.

The meeting ended with an exchange of souvenirs and assurances for further deeper relations between the two brotherly countries.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 2-4-2024

President urges swift completion of TTA with Turkmenistan

President expressed these views in a meeting with Ambassador of Turkmenistan to Pakistan Atadjan Movlamov, who called on him, at Aiwan-e-Sadr

By Asim Yasin

ISLAMABAD: President Asif Ali Zardari has called for an early finalization of the Transit Trade Agreement (TTA) with Turkmenistan to further boost bilateral cooperation between the brotherly countries, and said that the agreement, once signed, would help expand trade, promote regional connectivity as well as enhance economic activities in the region.

President expressed these views in a meeting with Ambassador of Turkmenistan to Pakistan Atadjan Movlamov, who called on him, at Aiwan-e-Sadr on Monday.

Both sides expressed the desire for the early completion of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline, which would support Pakistan's economy and help meet its energy needs. Welcoming the Ambassador, President Zardari said that Pakistan attached special value to its bilateral relations with Turkmenistan due to the centuries-old historical, religious and cultural links and wished to increase high-level exchanges to give fresh impetus to bilateral ties.

He expressed Pakistan's desire to work with Turkmenistan to further enhance cooperation.

The President highlighted the existing volume of trade between the two countries needed to be improved for the mutual benefit of the two countries. The President fondly recalled his visit to Turkmenistan during his first term as the President in 2010 to participate in the TAPI Summit as well as the 4th International Nauroze Festival in 2013.

Ambassador of Turkmenistan Atadjan Movlamov conveyed the warm greetings of the Turkmen President, Serdar Berdimuhamedov, and former President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov to President Asif Ali Zardari on his election. He said the Transit Trade Agreement would generate transit trade activities for both sides. The Ambassador congratulated the President on assuming the office of the President. President Zardari expressed wishes for the leadership of Turkmenistan and thanked them for their felicitations.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 12-4-2024

China's foreign trade expands at fastest pace in six quarters to hit 10 trillion in Q1, reflecting robust momentum

By Wang Cong and Tao Mingyang

China's total imports and exports expanded at the fastest pace in six quarters to hit a record of more than 10 trillion yuan (\$1.38 trillion) in the first quarter of 2024, according to official data on Friday, adding to a growing number of data signaling strong recovery momentum across the world's second-largest economy. In the first three months, in yuan terms, total imports and exports grew by 5 percent year-on-year to reach 10.17 trillion yuan, exceeding 10 trillion yuan for the first time during the same period, according to the General Administration of Customs (GAC). China's exports increased by 4.9 percent year-on-year to 5.74 trillion yuan, while imports grew by 5 percent year-on-year to 4.43 trillion yuan, the GAC said.

"China's foreign trade had a strong start and good momentum in the first quarter, laying a solid foundation for achieving the goal of improvement in quality and stability in quantity," Wang Lingjun, deputy head of the GAC, said on Friday, noting that China's trade is expected to further improve in the second quarter and continue to grow in the first half of the year.

China's trade with ASEAN expanded by 6.4 percent year-on-year in the first quarter of 2024 in yuan terms, but trade with the EU dropped by 3.5 percent and trade with the US fell 0.7 percent. Notably, exports to the US grew 2.1 percent year-on-year, while imports from the US fell 7.7 percent, according to official data. In terms of products, exports of mechanical and electrical

products increased of 6.8 percent year-on-year to hit 3.39 trillion yuan, accounting for 59.2 percent of the total export value. Exports of cars and ships jumped by 21.7 percent and 113.1 percent, according to the GAC. "These latest data demonstrated that China's manufacturing industry and consumer economy are recovering," Hu Qimu, a deputy secretary-general of the digital-real economies integration Forum 50, told the Global Times on Friday, noting other strong economic indicators such as manufacturing purchasing managers' index.

Hu said that while foreign trade faces challenges stemming from slowing external demand and so-called de-risking and decoupling moves promoted by some Western countries, the critical status of Chinese manufacturing and China's supply chain in the global industrial chain has not changed. "The world still relies on China's high-quality and cost-effective products and supply chain," Hu said.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 9-4-2024
GT Voice: China-Russia trade can
withstand escalating pressure
from the West

By Global Times

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov arrived in Beijing for an official visit on Monday. With escalating Western sanctions on Russia, how China-Russia economic and trade cooperation will be affected has become a topic of concern.

Against this backdrop, Lavrov's latest visit to China is being closely watched by observers with great interest. The visit comes at a time when economic and trade cooperation between China and Russia is at a critical juncture.

On the one hand, Moscow has accelerated the shift of its economic cooperation focus to the Asia-Pacific market, with China emerging as a key player. The scale and quality of China-Russia economic exchanges are steadily improving, covering areas like trade, industry, agriculture, logistics and infrastructure.

On the other hand, the US and its European allies have been ramping up sanctions on Russia, which have exerted tremendous pressure on the Russian economy and led to unprecedented challenges to the economic and trade relationship between Russia and China.

It can be anticipated that China-Russia trade will face more strains than ever under the Western pressure. For instance, even during a visit to China, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen still warned on Saturday that there will be "significant consequences" for China if its companies support Russia, Politico reported.

Western pressure on China over its Russia trade is not just due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, but also due to strategic goals, such as Washington's aim of targeting and containing China by means of sanctions. More and more signs show that it is actually a tactic of the West to point a finger at normal trade between China and Russia, which aims to use the opportunity to hurt Chinese companies and hinder the development of Chinese manufacturing and businesses.

However, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said in a press conference in February that normal trade and economic cooperation between China and Russia is not targeted at any third party or subject to any interference by any third party.

China firmly opposes illegal unilateral sanctions against Chinese companies and will take necessary measures to resolutely protect the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies, Mao said.

China remains steadfast in its position on this matter. Like many other developing countries and emerging economies, China is committed to pursuing its own interests while also adhering to international norms in economic and trade cooperation. Despite external pressures, China's willingness to continue economic and trade cooperation with Russia will not change.

China will not compromise its basic principles or its stance due to the long-arm jurisdiction of the US, nor will it become a follower of any other country's strategy. Chinese companies may take precautions to mitigate risks, but their willingness to cooperate and adhere to those principles will remain unwavering.

The deepening cooperation between China and Russia is a strong manifestation of the resilience of their trade, which is unlikely to be affected by Western sanctions in the long run. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Russia, with bilateral trade flourishing at a record pace. In 2023, China-Russia trade reached \$240.11 billion, up 26.3 percent compared with the previous year.

Also, about 92 percent of trade settlements between Russia and China are now conducted in Russian rubles and the yuan, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk said at the Boao Forum for Asia last month.

Such developments show the strong vitality and potential of China-Russia economic cooperation, which enjoys a high degree of trade complementarities, political mutual trust and diversified areas for cooperation. All these factors together constitute a strong foundation for bilateral trade, enabling it to withstand challenges amid the complex international environment.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 11-4-2024

EU probe of Chinese wind turbines 'protectionist' behavior: MOFCOM

Investigation distorts definition of subsidies, lacks transparency

By GT Staff Reporters

China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) in the wee hours of Thursday slammed the EU's planned probe into Chinese wind turbines. The ministry said the EU investigation distorts the definition of subsidies, lacks transparency, and is protectionist behavior that harms fair competition.

The EU on Tuesday announced it would launch a subsidy investigation into Chinese wind turbine suppliers in several EU countries, as the bloc steps up trade protectionism against China's new-energy industries.

The move drew deep concerns from Chinese officials, business groups and experts. They said that it showed the rising tendency of protectionism in the EU. They urged the bloc to abandon protectionist practices and return to the path of win-win cooperation.

The probe announced on Tuesday would be the fourth investigation conducted by the EU under its Foreign Subsidies Regulation within two months, with a clear aim to target China's new-energy companies. It will damage mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Europe, said a MOFCOM official in a meeting with Martin Lukas, director-general of the trade defense department of the European Commission, in Brussels on Wednesday, per a Xinhua News Agency report.

China urges the EU to immediately end its protectionist action and rectify the incorrect move, the Chinese official said.

MOFCOM spokesperson He Yadong also slammed the investigation on Thursday. He said that it clearly violates the principles of free trade. He emphasized that it is seriously disrupting normal cooperation between Chinese and European industries and is a typical example of protectionism.

The MOFCOM also hit back at an updated report by the EU that distorts China's policies, market environment and economic system.

The EU report covers various industries in China, including telecoms, semiconductors, railways, renewable energy and new-energy vehicles (NEVs). It's in line with the EU's recent investigations into Chinese NEVs and the latest anti-subsidy probe into Chinese wind turbines.

Protectionist moves by the EU have raised strong concerns in the business world.

"We strongly oppose any increase in tariffs on electric vehicles in China, and we look forward to continuing production and maintaining our market presence in China," Maximilian Butek, executive director at the

German Chamber of Commerce in China (Shanghai), told a press conference on Wednesday.

Butek noted that Chinese NEVs account for only about 1.5 percent of the market in Europe, which is much less than the market share of German NEVs in China.

Chinese analysts said that the real aim of Western politicians and media outlets that hype the subsidies and "overcapacity" narrative seems to be the protection of their own clean-energy industries.

"Accusations of subsidies and overcapacity in China's new-energy products by Europe carry a strong protectionist tone," Cui Hongjian, a professor at the Academy of Regional and Global Governance at Beijing Foreign Studies University, told the Global Times on Thursday.

The notion of "overcapacity" should be determined by market data, rather than used as an excuse for trade protectionism. Europe's long-term competitiveness needs to be built on innovation, and excluding Chinese products does not benefit anyone, Cui said.

Helga Zepp-LaRouche, founder of Germany-based political and economic think tank the Schiller Institute, told the Global Times on Thursday that the claim of "overcapacity" is just the latest attempt to find a justification for prioritizing speculative gains over basic research and development.

"Since China has given top priority to innovation as the motor of the rejuvenation of the economy, it has a competitive advantage. It is a deplorable fact that Europe has lost its way," she said.

The MOFCOM's He told a press conference on Thursday that the EU cannot claim to care about climate change while simultaneously promoting protectionism and restricting international green trade and investment. This double standards approach will hinder the global green transition, disrupt China-EU investment cooperation, and damage mutual economic and trade trust.

Achieving an energy transition to address climate change is also a goal of Europe, and implementing trade protectionism in certain industries would undermine Europe's open and free market image, Cui said.

China hopes that Europe will abandon protectionist practices and return to the path of win-win cooperation, providing a stable, fair, transparent and predictable competitive environment for green cooperation, He noted.

There is huge potential demand for new-energy products in the global market. Taking NEVs as an example. According to an estimate by the International Energy Agency, global demand for NEVs will reach 45 million in 2030, 4.5 times the 2022 figure, and global demand for new photovoltaic capacity will reach 820 gigawatts, about four times that of 2022.

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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 15-4-2024

Indian Army successfully conducts field trials of anti-tank guided missile system

The weapon system has been designed and developed by Defence Research and Development Organisation

PTI

New Delhi, The Indian Army has successfully carried out field trials of indigenously-developed man-portable anti-tank guided missile (MPATGM) weapon system, paving way for its induction into the force's armoury.

The weapon system has been designed and developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), officials said.

The overall system consisted of the MPATGM, launchers, target acquisition device and a fire control unit.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has complimented the DRDO and the Indian Army for the successful trials of the system, terming it as an important step towards achieving self-reliance in advanced technology-based defence system development.

The MPATG weapon system has been field evaluated in different flight configurations several times with an objective of proving the technology with high superiority, the defence ministry said.

"The warhead flight trials were successfully conducted at the Pokhran Field Firing Range on April 13. Missile performance and warhead performance were found to be remarkable," it said on Sunday.

It said an adequate number of missile firing trials have been successfully conducted towards achieving compliance of complete operational envelope as stipulated in the General Staff Qualitative Requirements.

"Penetration trials of the tandem warhead system of MPATGM have been successfully completed and it is found capable of defeating modern armour protected main battle tanks," it said.

The weapon system is well-equipped for operation in both day and night.

"The dual mode seeker functionality is a great value addition to the missile capability for tank warfare. With this, technology development and successful demonstration have been concluded and the system is now ready for final user evaluation trials leading towards its induction into the Indian Army," the ministry said.

Chairman DRDO Samir V Kamat congratulated the teams associated with the trials.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 4-4-2024

India, Australia Navy Chiefs discuss op engagements

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, The Navy Chiefs of India and Australia — both partners in Quad with the US and Japan — today discussed bilateral maritime cooperation, operational engagements and training exchanges.

Vice Admiral Mark Hammond, Chief of Royal Australian Navy, is on an official visit to India from April 2 to April 6. He interacted with Navy Chief Admiral R Hari Kumar and met Chief of Defence Staff Anil Chauhan today, the Ministry of Defence said.

India and Australia share commonality of perspective on several contemporary maritime security issues in the Indo-Pacific and have been working together closely in several bilateral and multilateral fora.

Earlier today, Vice Admiral Hammond laid a ceremonial wreath at the National War Memorial and was welcomed with the customary guard of honour presented by the Indian Navy at the South Block.

During the visit, he is also scheduled to call on the IAF Chief and the Defence Secretary. The Australian Navy Chief will visit the Southern Naval Command in Kochi and the Western Naval Command in Mumbai.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 2-4-2024

India, Thailand discuss maritime cooperation

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, The Navy Chiefs of India and Thailand today discussed mutual cooperation in maritime domain, training programmes and information sharing.

Admiral Adoong Pan-Iam, Commander-in-Chief, Royal Thai Navy, is on a three-day (April 1 to 3) official visit to India. He met Navy Chief Admiral R Hari Kumar here.

The visiting military commander is scheduled to meet representatives of the Indian defence industries and officials of the Department of Defence Production at New Delhi.

An interactive session with Indian Navy officials from the Warship Design Bureau is also planned to explore current trends in shipbuilding and identify future opportunities, including scope of ship maintenance and repairs in India.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 11-4-2024
Chandrayaan-3 team honoured with US
award for space exploration:
‘Inspiration’

HT News Desk

Last year in August, Chandrayaan-3's lander (Vikram) successfully landed on the Moon's south pole, marking India as the first country to achieve this feat.

The team from the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) responsible for the Chandrayaan-3 mission's success was honoured with the “2024 John L. ‘Jack’ Swigert Jr. Award for Space Exploration” on Monday, news agency ANI reported, citing a press release by the Space Foundation.

The award recognises their contribution in “raising the bar for space exploration.” Last year in August, during the Chandrayaan-3 mission, a successful landing occurred on the Moon's south pole, marking India as the first country to achieve this feat.

India's Consul General in Houston, DC Manjunath, accepted the award on behalf of ISRO during the opening ceremony of the annual Space Symposium in Colorado.

“India's leadership in space is an inspiration to the world,” Space Foundation CEO Heather Pringle said in a statement in January when the award was announced.

“The pioneering work of the entire Chandrayaan-3 team has again raised the bar for space exploration, and their remarkable lunar landing is a model to us all. Congratulations and we can't wait to see what you do next!” he said.

The Space Foundation, in a press release, highlighted that Chandrayaan-3, an ISRO-developed mission, has expanded humanity's space exploration horizons by becoming the first to land on the Moon's South Pole.

What is John L. ‘Jack’ Swigert Jr. Award?

The John L. “Jack” Swigert Jr. Award for Space Exploration celebrates remarkable achievements in space exploration and discovery, whether by a company, space agency, or consortium of organisations. The award is a tribute to the legacy of astronaut John L. “Jack” Swigert Jr., whose contributions “inspired the establishment of the Space Foundation.” A native of Colorado, Swigert was part of the iconic Apollo 13 lunar mission alongside retired U.S. Navy Captain James A. Lovell Jr. and Fred Haise. This mission gained worldwide attention when it faced a critical oxygen tank failure en route to the Moon, resulting in a daring and dramatic return to Earth.

Chandrayaan-3

India scripted history with its Chandrayaan-3 mission achieving the “first-ever landing at the unexplored south pole of the Moon, Earth's natural satellite.” This milestone was accomplished by the Chandrayaan-3's

lander, named Vikram, and the rover, Pragyan, touching down on the lunar surface at 6.04 pm on August 23.

This achievement marks India as the fourth country to successfully execute a “soft landing” on the Moon, following the US, China, and the former Soviet Union.

In recognition of this feat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that August 23 would be National Space Day, commemorating the success of Chandrayaan 3's Moon landing.

Furthermore, PM Modi declared that the landing site of Chandrayaan 3's moon lander would be named Shiv Shakti. Six months later, the internationally recognised authority for celestial object nomenclature officially endorsed this designation.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 5-4-2024

Army inducts indigenous
Akashteer system

Express News Service

The Army has started the induction of control and reporting systems under ‘Project Akashdeep’ to bolster its air defence capabilities, sources said Thursday. The deployment of the systems began with flagging off of the first batch of Control Centres from BEL Ghaziabad on Thursday.

Developed by Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL), the project is aimed at significantly enhancing the operational efficiency and integration of the Army's air defence mechanisms.

“The Akashteer Project is a cutting-edge initiative designed to automate air defence control and reporting processes by digitising the entire process,” a source said.

The source added that with 2024 designated as the ‘Year of Tech Absorption’, induction of Akashteer Control Centres will meet the current and futuristic requirements of complex air defence operations.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 5-4-2024

Army mulls creating ‘adversarial’ force
for competitive war games

Proposal discussed at Army Commanders’ Conference
Ajay Banerjee

New Delhi, The Army is planning to adopt multi-pronged changes to ensure absorption of niche technology and creation of an organisation that will “behave, operate and work like an adversary”, constantly challenging the established war games of the force.

The Ministry of Defence said such an “adversarial” force would ensure realistic wargames and training. At present, when war games are conducted, “adversary forces” are created from within the force, which do not challenge the Army enough.

The proposals in this regard were discussed at the Army Commanders' Conference held on April 1 and 2.

For adopting niche technologies, the option of creating a separate budget head will be explored.

At the field level, brigades and formations will be nominated to ensure greater efficiency and continuity in finalisation of trial reports of new technologies. Among other things discussed at the conference included the innovation potential of the Army Design Bureau.

The senior leadership of the Army discussed an array of security-related aspects, including ongoing transformation initiatives, leveraging technology and innovation for capability development, enhancing operational preparedness, addressing emerging security and HR-related issues.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh also reaffirmed government's commitment to the welfare of soldiers, veterans and their families.

He exhorted the senior leadership to embrace the aspects of jointness, integration and technological absorption.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 11-4-2024

30 IAF bases to get 5-layer security system

Ajay Banerjee

New Delhi, With an aim to ensure five layers of sensor, alarm and perimeter surveillance, 30 Indian Air Force (IAF) bases across the country are set to get a state-of-the-art security system.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has invited bids from Indian companies for the Integrated Perimeter Security System (IPSS) by June 24.

The system must be capable of providing surveillance in all weather and ambient light conditions throughout the year at both day and night.

The IPSS will consist of five layers of sensors for intrusion detection — an electrical smart power fence; a CCTV with an infra-red camera and inbuilt video analytics and automatic intrusion detection capabilities; a radar; underground vibration detection system connected with a dedicated optical fibre cable; and thermal cameras that can pick up things at night.

The layers of sensors are to be integrated by artificial intelligence-enabled software and automation. Water bodies such as drains, canals and culverts passing through the perimeter shall be protected using electro-optical sensors.

The MoD is looking at having "gap free coverage" throughout the perimeter of each air base. The move has been necessitated after the Pathankot air base attack in January 2016. A high-level committee led by Lt Gen Philip Campose (retd), a former Vice Chief of Army

Staff, suggested several emergency measures, which were carried out.

The electric fence will deter intruders by a non-lethal high voltage low shock and sound an alarm at the control room when someone attacks, tries to climb through or tampers with the fence.

The infra-red cameras, with an inbuilt motion detector, will be used for surveillance at night. Also, the MoD is looking to set up radars along the perimeter of the 30 IAF bases to ensure gap free coverage. The underground vibration-detection system will be able to spot anyone walking, crawling and tunnelling across the perimeter.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 1-4-2024

India-US tri-service exercise 'Tiger Triumph-24' concludes

PTI

The exercise highlights the strong strategic bond between India and the US, focusing on sharing best practices and procedures for multinational HADR operations.

The 14-day bilateral tri-service exercise between India and the US, 'Tiger Triumph-24', has concluded, officials said on Sunday.

The exercise that began on March 18 aimed at developing interoperability for conducting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations and refining standard operating procedures to enable rapid and smooth coordination between the forces of the two countries. The Indian Army's contingent comprising one battalion group took part in the second edition of the tri-service exercise in Visakhapatnam and Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh, along with the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force.

The closing ceremony of the amphibious exercise was held on board USS Somerset on March 30, a senior official said.

The exercise signifies the "robust strategic partnership" between the two countries and was aimed towards sharing best practices and standard operating procedures in undertaking multinational HADR operations.

The harbour phase was conducted in Visakhapatnam from March 18-25 and included pre-sail discussions, subject matter expert exchange, sports engagements, ship boarding drills and cross-deck visits, officials said. Personnel from both the navies celebrated the festival of Holi together on March 25, as part of the cultural exchange programme showcasing the vibrant and vivid culture of India, they said.

The sea phase was conducted from March 26-30 and it included units of both countries undertaking maritime exercises, followed by landing of troops at Kakinada for setting up of a joint command and control centre and a

joint relief and medical camp for HADR operations, the Navy spokesperson said in a statement.

"Cross-deck helicopter operations involving UH3H, CH53 and MH60R helicopters were also undertaken between ships of the Indian Navy and the US Navy off Kakinada and Visakhapatnam," the official added.

The participating units from the Indian Navy included a landing platform dock, landing ship tanks (large) including their integral landing crafts and helicopters, guided missile frigate and long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft.

The Indian Army was represented by one Infantry Battalion Group including mechanised forces and the Indian Air Force had deployed one medium-lift aircraft, transport helicopter and the Rapid Action Medical Team (RAMT), the statement said.

The US Task Force comprised a US Navy landing platform dock including its integral landing craft air cushions and helicopters, a destroyer, maritime reconnaissance and medium-lift aircraft, and also, US Marines, it said.

"Special Ops forces from all the three services also participated in the exercise and jointly undertook combined operations with the US counterparts at Visakhapatnam and Kakinada during the harbour and sea phases," the statement said.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 5-4-2024

Army plans organisation for realistic wargaming, training

Express News Service

Army Commanders have decided to explore the feasibility of creating a tailor-made organisation to function as an adversarial force to carry out realistic wargaming and training as part of efforts to enhance the force's combat potential.

At the Army Commanders Conference, which concluded this week, it was also decided to revise the Army's human resource management policies to facilitate absorption of niche technology with matching training infrastructure.

Other decisions taken at the conference include undertaking organisational and procedural transformation in force to ensure induction and absorption of niche technology towards futuristic capability development where the focus will be achieving self-reliance. In a statement, the Ministry of Defence said that towards this, the Army Design Bureau will be upscaled and separate cells of the bureau are being established at command headquarters.

"To further bolster the initiative, the option of creating a separate fund head will be explored. In addition, test bed brigades/formations will be nominated to ensure greater efficiency and continuity in trials and

finalisation of trial reports," the statement said, adding that future procurements will include aspects catering for holistic sustenance requirements during contract finalisation to ensure lifetime support.

It was also decided to explore more opportunities to collaborate with other ministries for optimal utilisation of resources and combine efforts for enhanced capability building and infrastructure development in border areas.

The Army Commanders' Conference is a biannual event, held in a hybrid format, commenced with a virtual session chaired by Army Chief Gen Manoj Pande on March 28 and it was followed by in-person discussions on April 1 and 2.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 4-4-2024

15th Contingent of SLFPC Departs for UN Peacekeeping Mission in Lebanon

The 15th contingent of the Sri Lanka Force Protection Company (SLFPC) in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) left for Lebanon on 03 April 2024 amidst greetings and best wishes.

The 15th SLFPC contingent consists of 125 Army personnel, including 11 Officers and 114 Other Ranks representing the Vijayabahu Infantry Regiment (VIR) and several other Regiments of the Sri Lanka Army. The contingent commanded by Lieutenant Colonel D.K.D Vithanage RSP of the VIR.

Major General Rohitha Aluvihare, the Commander of Security Forces – Central and the Colonel Commandant of the VIR, Major General Nalin Bandaranayake, the General Officer Commanding of the 14 Infantry Division and Major General Anil Perera, the Director, Directorate of Movement, along with several other Senior Officers and relatives were at the airport to extend best wishes on behalf of the Commander of the Army and to see them off to Lebanon

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 9-4-2024

Army commander details border blockade in southeast Iran

TEHRAN- Brigadier General Amir Gholam-Aliyan, the commander of the Army Ground Force in southeast Iran, has provided insights into the latest developments regarding the border blockade in the region.

Emphasizing the imperative of completing the border blockade program covering a 270 km area by year's end, he highlighted the strategic significance of securing these borders.

General Gholam-Aliyan underscored the unparalleled safety of Iran's borders, labeling the ongoing actions to fortify them as "unprecedented in the nation's history."

"The Army's presence along the northern frontier of Sistan and Baluchestan province, overlooking Afghanistan's borders, is pivotal," he remarked.

He further noted that the blockade initiative along the Afghanistan border, commenced eight months ago, has yielded positive outcomes.

Earlier in March, the Commander of Iran's Army Ground Force Brigadier General Kioumars Heidari, underscored the extensive deployment of forces across all national borders.

Highlighting the significant contributions of these warriors, he emphasized their collaboration with the Islamic Revolution Guards' Ground Forces and border patrol, collectively working to establish and maintain stable security.

General Heidari provided insights into the strategic positioning of the Ground Forces at the country's borders. "Divisions and regional bases are actively engaged in fulfilling their roles to bolster national security," he added.

Heidari reiterated the steadfast presence of the Army's Ground Forces at all national borders, emphasizing the enduring commitment of these warriors to ensuring continuous stable security.

He stressed that Iran's primary objective is to ensure stability and security within its borders, a responsibility shouldered by its Armed Forces.

Addressing ongoing efforts, he discussed the meticulous process of clearing areas contaminated with mines and remnants from the Iran-Iraq war era.

In early January, General Heidari warned that any hostile rhetoric or actions against Iran would be met with a "crushing response." Brigadier General Kioumars Heidari emphasized that safeguarding the nation's borders is a fundamental aspect of the army's operations.

He asserted, "In the event of any hostile actions threatening our interests, we are prepared to respond with force." Brigadier General Heidari emphasized that the Army's ground force is firmly stationed at all four corners of the country's borders and will not hesitate to defend Iran's interests.

He added that if the enemies try to undermine Iran's security or interests, the army will respond with force.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 2-4-2024

Iran to deploy new technologies to fortify eastern border security

TEHRAN- The Iranian defense minister has stated that security along Iran's eastern borders is set to receive a significant boost through the deployment of state-of-the-art equipment, advanced surveillance cameras, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani emphasized that the new initiative extends beyond mere fortifications, encompassing a comprehensive strategy that involves erecting barriers, deploying cutting-edge technology such as helicopters, drones, and micro-drones, as well as establishing robust telecommunications and weapons facilities. Additionally, he underscored the importance of enhancing the training and equipment of border guards to further fortify the nation's frontiers.

Asserting Iran's exceptional security posture, Minister Ashtiani rebuffed the notion that the recent terrorist incident reflects the strength of the perpetrating group, emphasizing that such acts are fundamentally terrorist in nature and do not signify the group's prowess.

Highlighting Iran's superior security standards compared to many other nations, the defense minister reiterated that while terrorism may afflict various countries, Iran's vigilance remains unparalleled.

Concluding his remarks, Minister Ashtiani affirmed that the implementation of the comprehensive strategy will markedly elevate border security levels.

Back on January 17, the Iranian defense minister declared that there are no limitations when it comes to defending the nation's interests and its people.

"We condemn terrorism worldwide. Any action against the rights of the Iranian people will definitely receive a reaction, and we strongly respond, and we regard no limits when it comes to defending our national interests," Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani said.

Minister Ashtiani highlighted the strategic relationship with Russia, stating that both nations have committed to adhere to the agreed terms in a memorandum of understanding between the two countries that is planned to be pursued with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The minister emphasized the importance of bilateral agreements, urging Russia to fully observe and follow issues related to Iran's security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, expressing confidence in Russia's commitment to these matters.

Addressing regional concerns, Minister Ashtiani stressed Iran's respect for the rights, interests, and territorial integrity of all countries, particularly neighbors, while asserting a firm response to any mischief at its borders.

Speaking on Iran's missile capabilities, he revealed the possession of various missiles with ranges under 2000 kilometers, including the Kheibar-class missile which is one of the most advanced missiles designed by the experts of the Ministry of Defense's Aerospace Industries Organization. It is a liquid-fueled missile with a warhead weighing 1,500 kilograms with impressive strategic and tactical capabilities. Ashtiani further underscored Iran's position as a global missile power

with cruise and ballistic missiles, expressing ongoing efforts to further enhance missile technology.

The minister also referenced ongoing developments in the region, including Iran's missile operation against terrorist headquarters in Syria, framing it as a legitimate act of defense. He clarified that warnings, diplomatic measures, and negotiation attempts definitely precede any military action, signaling a commitment to exhausting peaceful avenues before resorting to coercive measures. Ashtiani, once again, reiterated Iran's stance against global terrorism, affirming that any action violating the rights of the Iranian people would receive a strong and unrestricted reaction.

The defense minister highlighted the Ministry of Defense's continuous efforts in various sectors, emphasizing the ministry's strong commitment to safeguarding national interests and territorial integrity.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 9-4-2024

Iran's nuclear achievements highlighted on National Day of Nuclear Technology

TEHRAN - In a press conference commemorating National Nuclear Technology Day, Mohammad Eslami, the Head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, discussed the organization's achievements while vowing that Iran will not cave in to external pressure.

"Others don't want us to advance our nuclear industry on our own. They have been causing disturbance to demotivate us," Eslami said, adding that Iran's nuclear technology will continue to be a source of honor for the country.

The nuclear chief might have been referring to Israeli efforts to hinder Iran's peaceful nuclear program in the past two decades. The regime has assassinated multiple Iranian scientists and staged sabotage attacks on the country's nuclear sites on different occasions. It has, however, failed to deal a blow to Iran's nuclear program so far.

Eslami then emphasized the significance of the day, expressing hope for global change following the resistance of the Palestinian people against injustice.

"Although we carry sorrow in our hearts and are saddened by the injustice perpetrated by the Zionist regime, we hope that the global awakening, shaped by the resistance of the beloved people of Palestine, will eradicate this impure tree from this holy land," he stated.

Israeli officials have suggested to use nukes against the besieged Gaza Strip several times since the beginning of the regime's latest war against the enclave 6 months ago. While the remarks have been seen as an open admit to the possession of nuclear weapons, the International Atomic Energy Agency has so far refrained from inspecting any of the regime's nuclear sites. The UN

body has instead opted to turn the screw on Iran, which hosts the highest number IAEA inspectors in the world.

Continuing with his speech, Eslami also underscored the organization's strategic efforts in nuclear development, which he said have a focus on advancing radiation therapy and promoting indigenous systems to bolster various industries.

Furthermore, strides in medical advancements, particularly in radiopharmaceuticals, were highlighted, showcasing Iran's leadership in innovation for cancer treatment.

"In 2023, we registered 15 new achievements in the medical and radiopharmaceutical sector. The discussion on the use of alpha rays in radiopharmaceuticals is at the forefront, a milestone achieved for the first time globally. Our ability to maintain leadership in knowledge and innovation enables us to serve cancer patients effectively. The efficacy of this pharmaceutical in treating such conditions is defined as therapeutic, capable of eradicating cancerous tumors or neurological tumors."

Elsewhere in his comments, Eslami unveiled plans for the expansion of Iran's nuclear power plants, announcing that new plants will be built in Bushehr, Khuzestan, and Makran.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 3-4-2024

PLA Southern Theater Command conducts live-fire drills along China-Myanmar border

By Guo Yuandan

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Southern Theater Command has deployed the army and air force to conduct live-fire drills on the Chinese side of the China-Myanmar border starting from Tuesday, Tian Junli, a spokesperson at the PLA Southern Theater Command, said in a statement on Tuesday, stressing that the command has been prepared at all times to respond to various emergencies and is committed to safeguarding national sovereignty and border stability.

The exercise is in accordance with the annual training plan and aims to test the rapid mobility, precise incapacitation, blockade and joint strike capabilities of the forces, Tian said.

On Monday, the PLA Southern Theater Command also released a notice about the drills, saying that it started at 8 am on Tuesday and will last through 6 pm on Wednesday. It reminded vehicles and personnel entering this area to comply with traffic control.

The notice unveiled the area for the drills, which involves the towns of Xima, Nongzhang, Longba and Zhangfeng in Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture of Southwest China's Yunnan Province.

In November 2023, the PLA Southern Theater Command conducted a series of real combat training and drills along the Chinese side of the China-Myanmar border, a move that experts said was to safeguard the stability of border areas and the safety of personnel from impacts caused by the civil war in Myanmar.

This latest exercise starting Tuesday fully demonstrates the PLA's determination and capability to safeguard national sovereignty, border stability and the safety of people's lives and property, Zhang Junshe, a Chinese military expert, told the Global Times.

The exercise will further enhance the troops' sense of vigilance, improving their rapid response and capabilities in combat to ensure that the troops can effectively fulfill their mission tasks, Zhang said.

Compared with the live combat exercises held in November 2023, the PLA air force also participated in this exercise, which can further enhance the theater command's capabilities in aerial reconnaissance and surveillance, rapid maneuvering and striking. This is more conducive to strengthening the theater command's response to various emergencies, Zhang said.

This exercise is part of the annual training plan, indicating that frontline troops have been maintaining normalized combat readiness training for missions. The exercise involves coordinated participation of army and air forces, focusing on testing the troops' maneuverability, precision and strike capabilities, which is in line with operational requirements for responding to current security situations, said Zhuo Hua, an international affairs expert at the School of International Relations and Diplomacy of Beijing Foreign Studies University.

Zhuo said that China and Myanmar share a long border, and their cooperation is comprehensive and wide-ranging, especially in steadily advancing cooperation projects of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Therefore, the security and stability of Myanmar directly affects the interests of the two peoples.

However, in recent years, the security situation in the northern part of the China-Myanmar border has been complex and severe. The frontline troops of the Southern Theater Command will continue to strengthen combat capabilities in response to any emergencies, Zhuo said.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 12-4-2024

Light blue symbolizes China's celestial pursuit from art to moon exploration

By Wu Chaolan

In Chinese culture, light blue is more than just a color — it's a profound expression, a sentiment interwoven with the nation's identity. Historically used by poets and artists to convey their deep affection for the cosmos,

particularly the moon, this hue has evolved to symbolize China's bold strides in space exploration, linking artistic tradition to cosmic ambition.

Throughout history, light blue in Chinese art captured the moon's essence, symbolizing peace and curiosity. This tranquil hue, reflecting the night sky's vastness, served as a medium to revere and contemplate the celestial. The cultural connection extends to astronomical observations noted in ancient texts like the "Book of Changes" and is celebrated in festivals such as the Mid-Autumn Festival, where moon worship underscores unity and prosperity. Esteemed poets Li Bai and Du Fu celebrated the moon in their works, embedding this celestial body in the nation's spiritual and intellectual fabric.

This deep-rooted lunar connection has strongly influenced China's modern space endeavors. The historical appreciation of the moon's light blue now inspires the nation's lunar exploration programs, transforming artistic passion into a scientific pursuit. China's lunar missions, particularly the ambitious fourth phase of its exploration program, are laying the groundwork for the International Lunar Research Station, with missions like Chang'e-4 through Chang'e-8 paving the way for future exploration.

China's lunar exploration has entered a new era with the launch of the Queqiao-2 relay satellite, a critical component for Earth-Moon communication, signaling a major leap in the fourth phase of its lunar exploration efforts. Named after the legendary magpie bridge in Chinese mythology, this satellite serves as a metaphorical bridge, connecting not only Earth and the moon but also encouraging connections between China and the international scientific community.

China is committed to international collaboration in space exploration, recognizing the moon's universal value and heritage. The country actively seeks partnerships with other nations to further its cosmic ambitions. A recent example of this collaborative spirit is the signing of two memorandums of understanding with Thailand, which focus on joint efforts in the peaceful exploration of outer space and participation in the International Lunar Research Station project. These partnerships showcase China's approach to space exploration, which is based on cooperation, knowledge sharing, and collective advancement in understanding the universe.

China's ethos of collaboration in space exploration is not just about advancing its own ambitions but also about contributing to a global community dedicated to unraveling the mysteries of the cosmos. Through partnerships with international space agencies and research institutions, China is sharing its achievements and challenges in lunar exploration, fostering a model of cooperation that mirrors the interconnectedness

symbolized by the color light blue in traditional Chinese culture.

The transition from the artistic use of light blue to represent the moon to its symbolic association with China's lunar missions illustrates a blend of cultural heritage and technological innovation. This evolution reflects China's ongoing dedication to cosmic exploration, bridging the ancient cultural respect for the moon with contemporary scientific endeavors.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 2-4-2024

The Philippines' repeated renegeing on its promises and making provocations the real cause of the current maritime tensions: Chinese FM

By Global Times

The Philippines' repeated baseless accusations against China are merely attempts to cover up their own breaches of commitments and provocations in the South China Sea issue, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said on Monday, refuting the country's accusations against China of "intimidating smaller countries."

On Friday and Saturday, the Philippine Department of National Defense (DND) and the Philippine National Security Council (NSC) assistant director general Jonathan Malaya, accused China of "patronizing" and "intimidating smaller countries," saying that China is "in for a rude surprise" if it thinks it can intimidate Filipinos.

In response to the statements, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said during a press briefing on Monday that Nansha Qundao, including Ren'ai Jiao, has always been China's territory. The scope of Philippine territory is defined by several international treaties. China's Nansha Qundao lies beyond the limits of the Philippine territory.

The Philippines tries to hide the fact that it has broken its promise to China, violated China's sovereignty and kept provoking China. This is the only viable explanation for the Philippines' string of false accusations against China, Wang said.

Wang pointed out that the truth on the Ren'ai Jiao issue is that the Philippines went back on its words. It made a serious promise to tow away its illegally grounded warship, but 25 years on, the Philippine vessel is still there. What's more, the Philippines breached the understanding between the two sides on properly handling the situation on Ren'ai Jiao, Wang said.

According to Wang, the Philippines promised it will not reinforce the grounded warship and will inform China in advance of resupply plans. Out of humanitarian considerations, China made special provisional arrangements for Philippine vessels sending living

necessities to the warship quite a few times. However, the Philippines refuses to honor its promise and made attempts to send construction materials for large-scale repair and reinforcement of the warship in order to permanently occupy Ren'ai Jiao.

The Philippines violated the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) jointly signed by China and ASEAN countries, Wang said.

According to Wang, the Article 5 of the DOC stipulates that the parties undertake to exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability including, among others, refraining from action of inhabiting on the presently uninhabited islands, reefs, shoals, cays, and other features.

Wang also pointed out that Ren'ai Jiao is uninhabited, and parties should maintain its state of hosting zero personnel and facilities. However, not long ago, the Philippine military spokesperson openly vowed to build permanent structures on Ren'ai Jiao. The Philippines has also repeatedly sent people to step on China's Tiexian Jiao and other uninhabited islands and reefs that belong to China in the South China Sea, which seriously contravenes the principles of the DOC. The Philippines, backed by external forces, has been going back on its words and making provocations. This is the real cause of the current tensions at sea. Nothing will hide the truth, and no one should turn black into white. The Philippines needs to immediately stop violating China's sovereignty and its provocations, and return to observing the spirit of the DOC. China will not waver in its resolve to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, Wang said.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 8-4-2024

PLA Southern Theater Command launches naval and air combat patrol in South China Sea

By Wang Qi and Guo Yuandan

The Southern Theater Command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) organized a joint naval and air combat patrol in the South China Sea on Sunday, the PLA announced, on the same day of joint drills attended by the US, the Philippines, Japan and Australia, which analysts said was a highly defiant and aggressive muscle-flexing move against China amid the rising tensions between Beijing and Manila.

Chinese experts said on Sunday that China's combat patrol represents a tit-for-tat response to the US-Philippines-Japan-Australia's joint drills, illustrating PLA's firm resolve and strong capability in safeguarding China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests. It shows that China, while showing great

restraint on the South China Sea issue, is also well-prepared to deal with any contingency.

They also warned that external interference represented by the US in the South China Sea has become "the biggest threat to regional security and stability," and Philippines' calculation of "inviting wolf into the house" is not welcomed by regional countries and will eventually backfire.

Tit-for-tat response

In a brief statement released on Sunday morning on social media, the PLA Southern Theater Command stressed that "all military activities disrupting the South China Sea stability and creating hotspots are under control," without giving more details about the operation.

Before the PLA combat patrol, the Chinese side made several warnings against Philippines' provocations and its attempts to introduce external forces as well as Manila's tricks of "playing victim."

China Coast Guard (CCG) on Saturday warned the Philippines that any tactic infringing on China's rights is doomed to be futile, and the CCG will continue to regularly enforce the law to safeguard rights and interests in China's jurisdictional waters, in response to Philippine vessels' illegal activities in the waters adjacent to China's Houteng Jiao (also known as Houteng Reef) in the South China Sea.

Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson Wu Qian said on March 28 that the Philippines' harassment and provocations are the direct cause of the recent escalation of the South China Sea issue, noting China will not allow the Philippines to act willfully.

Ding Duo, deputy director of the Institute of Maritime Law and Policy at the China Institute for South China Sea Studies, told the Global Times on Sunday that different from the past, the "combat patrol" highlights the preparation of actual combat.

It's a kind of all-state, all-factor patrol, and the PLA can immediately carry out combat tasks in case of an emergency, said Ding.

The combat patrol is PLA's "tit-for-tat response" to counter and deter the muscle-flexing actions, namely the US-Japan-Australia-Philippines joint military exercises, Ding noted. "It also reflects PLA's firm resolve and strong capability to safeguard China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea."

It cannot be ruled out that the PLA's naval and air combat patrol in the South China Sea would include some particularly targeted and specific measures, said Ding.

China has shown its attitude by the combat patrol and will always respond to Philippines' provocative actions and attempts to introduce external interference in the South China Sea, Yang Xiao, deputy director of the

Institute of Maritime Strategy Studies, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, told the Global Times on Sunday.

On the South China Sea issue, China has always shown great restraint and does not want conflicts so that the region can remain stable, but China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests are inviolable, and China will make all preparations to deal with emergencies, Yang added.

Escalating provocations

Citing a Japanese defense official, Kyodo News reported that the first ever "maritime cooperative activity" jointly attended by defense forces of the US, Japan, Australia and the Philippines on Sunday includes "anti-submarine warfare drills" and "maritime patrols."

According to the joint statement of the four countries' defense ministers released on Saturday, the drill, held in the Philippines' "exclusive economic zone," demonstrates the "collective commitment" to strengthen regional and international cooperation in support of "a free and open Indo-Pacific."

According to the ministers' statement, the joint drills are aimed at strengthening the "interoperability" of their forces' "doctrines, tactics, techniques and procedures."

Arsenio Andolong, a spokesperson of Philippines' national defense department, said on Saturday that 5 naval ships from the four countries will participate in the joint drills, including the Philippines' offshore patrol vessels, BRP Gregorio Del Pilar (PS-15) and BRP Ramon Alcaraz (PS-16); the US Navy's littoral combat ship, USS Mobile (LCS-26); Australia's HMAS Warramunga (FFH-152); and Japan's destroyer JS Akebono (DD-108), the Philippine News Agency reported.

"Judging from the content made public, the joint exercise is more symbolic, but less specific," Yang said. Echoing Yang, Ding believes the most important function of the joint exercise is to maintain the heat of the South China Sea issue and further manipulate international public opinion. "The participating vessels of the four countries are not their core combat units, among which the Philippine ships are retired second-hand goods and cannot be integrated into the formation operations," Yang noted.

Although there are "anti-submarine warfare drills," the Philippines, as the only party concerned in the South China Sea, does not have anti-submarine capability and thus cannot participate in the program, Yang added.

This is the reason why the four countries began to hype up public opinion before the exercise began, which is nothing but to show the so-called concern to the South China Sea issue, and embolden Manila, the expert remarked.

The joint drills also came before the three-way summit between US President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime

Minister Fumio Kishida and Philippine President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr in the White House on April 11. VOA called it "part of Biden's strategy to stitch together existing bilateral alliances into broader mini-laterals to amplify US influence in Asia" and "counter Beijing."

Before the drills, Jose Manuel Romualdez, Philippine ambassador to the US, said that Japan and Philippines were close to signing a reciprocal access agreement (RAA) that would also let their militaries train and conduct exercises in each other's countries, the Financial Times reported on Thursday.

The Philippines has deepened its coordination with external forces over the past two years, and has conducted military exercises with the US, Japan, and the Philippines and Australia. The latest four-way drills are just a presentation to bring the collusion between the four countries from behind the scenes to the forefront, Ding said.

Chinese experts believe that the future exercises between the Philippines, the US or allies like Japan, and Australia in the South China Sea would be carried out regularly. Each exercise differs only in the area, size and type of troops involved.

With the "support" of external forces, the Philippines is expected to continue or even escalate provocations against China in the South China Sea, with a surging ultra-nationalist sentiments, risk-taking and speculative psychology, Ding said.

However, Manila's calculation will eventually backfire, as its approach of "inviting wolf into the house" will damage the peace and stability of the entire region, and will not be welcomed by regional countries, Ding noted.

Ding added that the external interference represented by the US in the South China Sea issue, as well as the long-standing military presence and frequent military exercises in the region, is the biggest threat to regional security and stability.

On April 2, Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke with US President Joe Biden on the phone, with Xi stating China's position on the South China Sea. During the call, the Chinese side stressed that China has indisputable sovereignty over Nansha Qundao and its adjacent waters, noting the US is not a party to the South China Sea issue and should not intervene in matters between China and the Philippines. China has a strong will and resolve to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, according to Wang Wenbin, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson on April 3.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 9-4-2024 **Russian FM's visit to China 'further strengthens strategic partnership'**

By Yang Sheng

As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov arrived in China on Monday for an official visit, many observers said the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership will be further strengthened despite US pressure.

At the invitation of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who is also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, the Russian top diplomat will pay an official visit to China from Monday to Tuesday, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning announced on Sunday.

Mao said at a routine press conference on Monday that the two sides will exchange views and coordinate stances on the development of bilateral ties, cooperation in different fields and the international issues of shared common concern on the sidelines of the 75th anniversary of the establishment of China-Russia diplomatic relations.

As Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova announced earlier, in Beijing Lavrov will hold talks with Wang. In particular, the ministers will discuss the situation in Ukraine and the Asia-Pacific region, issues of bilateral cooperation and interaction in the international arena, Zakharova said, TASS reported on Monday.

Cui Heng, a scholar from the Shanghai-based China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation, told the Global Times on Monday that "Lavrov could be paving the way for the first foreign visit of President Putin since his reelection, but the final confirmation would be a formal announcement released by the two sides."

Reuters reported in March that Putin will travel to China in May, in what could be the Kremlin chief's first overseas trip of his new presidential term, citing five sources familiar with the matter. The Kremlin, when asked about the Reuters report, said information on Putin's visits would be released closer to the date.

Li Haidong, a professor at the China Foreign Affairs University, said the Russian top diplomat could discuss with China about some urgent and hotspot issues like the Ukraine crisis and counterterrorism cooperation.

Russia just experienced a horrific terrorist attack in Moscow, and the attackers are from Central Asia. Chinese engineers in Pakistan have also been attacked by terrorists in the region, so both China and Russia share common concerns about terrorism, said analysts.

China and Russia are two major powers in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and counterterrorism cooperation between them and other SCO members is

significant for regional peace and stability, especially when the threat of terrorism has reemerged in some regions, experts said. Apart from the discussion on diplomatic level, the militaries, law-enforcement and intelligence agencies of the two countries will also promote the cooperation to target terrorism, experts said.

China-Russia-US trilateral relations

US Secretary of Treasury Janet Yellen is also on her visit to China and she warned that Chinese companies could face "significant consequences" if they provided "material support for Russia's war on Ukraine," according to the release from US Department of Treasury.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry said in response China's stance is very clear and has always paid constructive efforts for mediation to stop the conflict. The Chinese foreign ministry added that other countries should not attack and smear the normal relations between China and Russia, and should not harm the legitimate rights and interests of China and Chinese companies, noting China will take firm measures to safeguard its legitimate rights and interests.

Yang Jin, an associate research fellow at the Institute of Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, told the Global Times on Monday China has its own principles in developing ties with major powers like Russia and the US, as "we will never interference in other countries' internal affairs and will not meddle in the ties between other countries, so we hope the US could show the same respect to the China-Russia relations."

China is paying efforts to mediate the conflict between Russia and Ukraine since the very beginning of the crisis, and China never adds fuels to the flame, and if the US sanctions Chinese companies who do normal business with Russia in the name of "supporting Russia's war on Ukraine," that would be very unwise, as China will retaliate for sure, experts said.

Cui said that the timing of Lavrov's visit to China is very interesting, as it's overlapping with the time of Yellen's visit, and takes place before the potential visit by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, "so this just shows the complexity of the interactions between China, Russia and the US, and in the trilateral relations, China is driven by its own national interests."

Li said in the China-Russia-US relations, "we are in a position with the most flexibility, while the US and Russia have very limited space to change the deadlock and hostility in their relations. The key for China to remain flexible is that we don't favor one take over another."

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 6-4-2024

China, Thailand to cooperate in lunar exploration missions

BEIJING, (Xinhua) -- China and Thailand will cooperate on the exploration and peaceful use of outer space as well as on the International Lunar Research Station, according to two memorandums of understanding (MoUs) signed Friday in Beijing.

China National Space Administration (CNSA) and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation of Thailand signed the two MoUs.

China's Chang'e-7 lunar exploration mission, to be launched around 2026, will have onboard a Thailand-developed global space weather monitoring device, which is designed to observe cosmic radiation and space weather from the lunar perspective. It will be the first time that a scientific instrument from Thailand has entered deep space from Earth orbit.

China's Chang'e-8 mission, to be launched around 2028, provides a payload capacity of 200 kg for international cooperation, and multiple applications from Thailand for lunar surface operation robots and scientific payloads are currently under selection.

China is implementing the fourth phase of its lunar exploration program with the main target of building up the basic model of the International Lunar Research Station, according to Guan Feng, director of the Lunar Exploration and Space Engineering Center of CNSA.

The fourth phase includes the Chang'e-4, Chang'e-6, Chang'e-7 and Chang'e-8 missions.

China and Thailand will strengthen cooperation in the fields of space exploration, space application and space capacity building, by implementing joint space projects, scientific exchange programs and personnel training programs, exchanging data and information, among other forms of collaboration, according to the MoUs.

Both sides will carry out related research and draft a plan on the demonstration, engineering implementation, operation and application of the International Lunar Research Station.

Other countries, international organizations, research institutes, universities, industrial entities and scientists are also welcome to join the International Lunar Research Station program, and benefit from joint space exploration, according to the MoUs.

"In terms of global cooperation, China has signed cooperation agreements with more than 10 countries and international organizations. More countries and international organizations are welcome to participate in discussion, construction and sharing, to jointly build the scientific research facilities on the lunar surface for humanity," Guan said.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 14-4-2024

**Fallacies spread by US Southern
Command Commander on China-
Argentina deep space exploration
cooperation 'absurd, lack basic respect':
embassy**

By Global Times

The Chinese Embassy in Argentina on Saturday expressed its strong dissatisfaction and resolute opposition to the recent remarks made by the commander of the US Southern Command, slamming the remarks as "contrary to the facts, absurd, and lacking even the most basic respect for China and Argentina," for which the Chinese side is deeply shocked and angered.

Regarding the Deep Space Station in Neuquén, Argentina and China-Argentina economic and trade cooperation, on April 2, Laura Richardson, the commander of US Southern Command, visited Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, to meet Argentine President Javier Milei and raised concerns about the deep space station, intended for radio astronomy, radar observations, and spacecraft missions of China, according to the media outlet Newsendip on Wednesday.

The media outlet noted that Richardson claimed the station provides the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) with "global tracking and surveillance capabilities" which "could translate into global military capabilities."

In response, the Chinese Embassy in Argentina stated on Saturday, regarding the Neuquén Deep Space Station, China and Argentina have clarified the intended use of the facility on multiple occasions.

As a space technology cooperation project between China and Argentina, it does not have any special purposes other than civilian use, and its operation is open and transparent, the embassy said in the statement.

The statement stressed that space is the common home of humanity, not an arena for power struggles, noting some in the US are still stuck in the old era of Cold War thinking and zero-sum games.

The embassy revealed, in fact, the US has around 800 military bases overseas and has stationed 173,000 troops in 159 countries and regions. The international community is deeply concerned about US activities at military bases overseas, and people in various countries have the right to know what military activities the US is openly conducting on the territory of other countries. Is

it seriously undermining the sovereignty and security of other countries? The US needs to provide a clear explanation to the international community.

Instead of reflecting on itself, the US is blatantly applying double standards, deliberately slandering, smearing, and attacking China-Argentina deep space exploration, essentially politicizing, instrumentalizing, and weaponizing technological issues, maliciously depriving China and Argentina of their rights to use science and technology for their own development and to maintain their own space hegemony.

China-Argentina economic and trade cooperation is based on mutual respect and win-win cooperation, which is in the common interests of both sides. The Belt and Road Initiative is an open and inclusive international cooperation initiative. China has always adhered to the principles of voluntary participation, equality and mutual benefit, openness and transparency in carrying out relevant cooperation with relevant countries, and no partner has accepted the so-called "debt trap" theory.

Since the proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative 10 years ago, it has driven nearly a trillion dollars in investment, formed more than 3,000 cooperation projects, created 420,000 jobs for partner countries, and lifted nearly 40 million people out of poverty in partner countries. Under the framework of jointly building the Belt and Road Initiative, China and Argentina have implemented a series of practical cooperation projects in energy, electricity, infrastructure, communications, and other fields, playing an important role in upgrading Argentina's industries, social development, job creation, and improving people's livelihoods, according to the embassy.

The embassy pointed out that Latin American and Caribbean countries, including Argentina, are independent sovereign states, not the backyard of the US. The Argentine government and people have the wisdom and ability to choose cooperation partners that are in their own interests.

China will continue to uphold the principles of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit, win-win cooperation, and openness and inclusiveness. Based on respecting each other's needs and interests, China will carry out practical cooperation in various fields with Argentina to better promote the development and revitalization of both countries and improve social welfare, continuously adding resilience and vitality to the global economy.