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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 18-4-2024

Avoid escalation, US tells India, Pakistan

Mum on PM's remarks on cross-border ops

Sandeep Dikshit

New Delhi, Refraining from commenting on Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's remarks that India will not hesitate to kill terrorists in their homes, the US has instead called on India and Pakistan to avoid escalation and find a resolution through dialogue.

Asked at a media briefing whether the Biden administration was concerned about such statements, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said, "As I have said before, the US is not going to get into the middle of this. But we do encourage both India and Pakistan to avoid escalation and find a resolution through dialogue."

On April 11, Prime Minister Modi had said during the tenure of the BJP government "terrorists are being killed in their own homes".

Miller also refrained from commenting on whether the US will impose sanction on foreigners found involved in attempts at assassinations on its soil. "I am never going to preview any sanction actions, which is not to say that there are any coming, but when you ask me to talk about sanctions, it's something that we don't discuss openly," said Miller. The question was aimed at eliciting a response on the Indian Government's recent admission that a rogue RAW official, who has since left the service, was behind the abortive attempt to kill Khalistani separatist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. An Indian national, Nikhil Gupta, who spilled the beans to an undercover US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agent is in custody and has been charged with murder-for-hire of Pannun.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 21-4-2024

Siachen saga: Forty years since PM Indira Gandhi captured it, the glacier remains a military priority

Ajay Banerjee

Forty years since Prime Minister Indira Gandhi okayed the Indian Army's plan to capture the 76-km-long Siachen Glacier, multiple strategic implications have emerged and Siachen remains a 'military priority' for India.

Operation Meghdoot — launched on April 13, 1984, to capture Siachen — was not a spur-of-the-moment decision. It was thought through, calibrated, planned and also practised. The move was a correction of three strategic oversights — first in 1949, then in 1965, followed by the developments after the 1971 war. After the India-Pak war of 1947-48, the Karachi Agreement

of 1949 agreed upon a ceasefire line (CFL). The 1965 India-Pak war ended with an agreement at Tashkent. The Simla Agreement was signed post the 1971 war. Notably, none of the three agreements demarcate, on ground, the Line of Control (LoC) beyond Point NJ 9842 in present-day Ladakh.

Exploration missions

Siachen Glacier's existence, its length and location were a matter of speculation among western explorers.

British explorer William Moorcroft passed close to the glacier's snout in 1821 and it is described in the 1841 book 'Travels in the Himalayan Provinces...'

In 1848, Sir Henry Storchey, a British civil servant, became the first westerner to 'discover' the glacier.

EC Ryall of the Survey of India sketched the lower part of the glacier in 1861, and determined its length was 16 miles.

In 1889, Sir Francis Younghusband, in an attempt to find the watershed between Central Asia and India, noted that Turkestan La (along what is now known as Indira Col) separated the two.

In 1909, TG Longstaff became the first westerner to traverse the glacier.

In 1912, an American couple camped on the glacier for over two months. C Grant Peterkin, attached to the expedition, surveyed the glacier from its head at Indira Col to its snout at Nubra river.

The territory north of NJ 9842 — the glaciers — was deemed to be too treacherous, with peaks in excess of 22,000 feet and passes at 18,000 feet.

The 1949 agreement said, "From Point NJ 9842, the ceasefire line (CFL) will run northwards to the glaciers."

India and Pakistan differ on what defines "northwards to the glaciers". Islamabad, oddly, claims that the LoC should go north-east and end at Karakoram Pass, dividing Ladakh and Xinjiang, under Chinese control. Post April 1984, India has positioned its troops along the watershed and the claim line runs "northwards" of Point NJ 9842. The posts held by Indian troops are now referred to as the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL), which is 110 km long.

How a map triggered action

Ambiguity on the alignment of the LoC allowed Pakistan to attempt cartographic calisthenics. Between 1972 and 1983, it permitted foreign expeditions on the Siachen Glacier and the surrounding peaks, with Pakistani army officers accompanying them.

In India, things happened by coincidence. In the summer of 1974, German mountaineers Jaroslav Poncar and Volker Stallbohm met Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Sheikh Abdullah, seeking permission for rafting down the Indus in Ladakh.

Abdullah agreed and even hooked the Germans up with Col Narinder (Bull) Kumar, posted at the High Altitude

Warfare School in Gulmarg. The expedition was carried out in 1975.

The Germans were back in India in 1977 with another request — a trek to the 24,600 feet high Mamostong Kangri in the southeast of Siachen. India did not give permission, but Pakistan did. The Germans, in 1978, climbed up the 18,000 feet high Bilafond La from the Pakistan side, only to reach till Siachen — all these were part of the undefined LoC.

Amid the permission-seeking documentation for the trek, Col Kumar got hold of a map from the Germans. In January 1978, he took the map to the Director General of Military Operations, Lt Gen ML Chibber. Army Chief TN Raina gave his nod to the budget for Col Kumar's expedition to Siachen in October.

The location of the Mamostong glacier and its peaks spurred India into action as the peak is closer to Depsang, facing China, than being in proximity to Pakistan.

Air Vice Marshal Manmohan Bahadur (ret'd), then a young pilot tasked at Leh, remembers the expedition in detail. "We would fly over the Siachen Glacier in our helicopters, and hover at the spot to drop fresh vegetables," he says. He recollects: "On October 6, 1978, Sqn Leader ML Monga and I were tasked to evacuate an Army Captain and a jawan from an 'advance base camp' (now called Kumar Post at 15,600 feet). They were pulled out around 2 pm when wind turbulence had set in."

Siachen plan

Following the 1978 expedition, the Indian Army carried out two similar mountaineering expeditions in 1980 and 1981. Harish Kapadia, a mountaineer, described these expeditions in his 2005 book, 'Into the Untravelled Himalaya: Travels, Treks, and Climbs': "The Indian government (revealed these treks only in 1983) made an attempt to pass them off as mountaineering ventures but their actual intentions were pretty obvious."

In 1983, the 'Siachen plan' was given shape. Two Indian Army patrols were launched between June and September. The second one was tasked with building a small shelter. The components were lifted by helicopters, and so was the patrol party.

In August 1983, the Pakistan army sent two protest notes, which for the first time formally projected Pakistan's claim line. The note asked the Indian side: "Instruct your troops to withdraw south of Point NJ 9842... Any delay in vacating our territory will create a serious situation."

In other words, the LoC, agreed upon in a signed and sealed document, was being amended unilaterally by Pakistan and its army tried sending two companies up the Siachen in September/October 1983. The aim was to occupy the two entry points — from their side — to the Saltoro Ridge, Bilafond La and Sia La.

On April 13, 1984, a platoon of the Indian Army was flown onboard helicopters to Bilafond La. The rest, as

they say, is history. Pakistan tried an offensive on April 24, but was beaten back. By then, the only other pass, Sia La, had been secured by India. The following year, in February 1985, the Pakistan army made another attempt, but was repulsed.

Lt Gen Sanjay Kulkarni (ret'd), who led the 4 Kumaon platoon on April 13, 1984, and planted the Indian flag at Bilafond La, remembers: "We had no navigational aid to guide us other than our Survey of India maps. We had walked over Siachen for months for two previous years."

In July 1984, an Indo-Japanese expedition led by Col Balwant Singh Sandhu was okayed for the same Mamostong Kangri which Col Kumar had seen on the map of the Germans.

Why is Siachen important

Saltoro Ridge, dominated by the Indian Army, overlooks the Gilgit-Baltistan area of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). Indian military presence guards the routes leading to Ladakh from the eastern flank of the glacier that have an access from the Depsang plains in Ladakh. The northern part of the glacier, ringed by very high peaks, dominates the Shaksam valley, which is under Chinese control since Pakistan illegally ceded it in 1963. China's Karakoram Highway, part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, runs close by.

In the past 20 years, the unwarranted entry of the Chinese under the guise of road builders and dam builders means the area immediately west of Siachen now poses a collusive China and Pakistan threat. Also, the present crisis along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) would have been different if Pakistan's false claim line from Point NJ 9842 to Karakoram Pass was not challenged by India.

Lt Gen Rakesh Sharma (ret'd), a former commander of the Leh-based 14 Corps, says, "The glacier's geostrategic importance cannot be underplayed, especially in hindsight of the 2020 Chinese incursions in eastern Ladakh."

The Saltoro Ridge, coupled with Siachen Glacier and Saser Ridge, is the most daunting geographical stretch. It also cleanly divides Gilgit-Baltistan and Aksai Chin in northern Ladakh, says Gen Sharma. "If this region was not held by the Indian Army, the Pakistan army and the Chinese would have ventured to join up." The 1984 operation put a 'strong wedge', thwarting Pakistan-China designs, he adds.

Can it be de-militarised?

Pakistan has suggested de-militarisation. It was discussed at Track-II diplomatic channels but never agreed to. From the Pakistan side, the approach to the Saltoro Ridge and the glacier is vulnerable as the Indian Army occupies the heights.

From an Indian perspective, vacating anything is not possible. Since the ceasefire of 2003, firing by both sides has stopped. However, troops still need to man the region.

The state-of-the-art surveillance systems, combined with ground-based and air-based stand-off weapons, stand guard. But it is the Army troops on ground who dominate the area. "Siachen Glacier cannot and must not be de-militarised in isolation. Based on current relations, any de-militarisation is a far cry," says Gen Sharma.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 26-4-2024

**India-China border situation at present
'generally stable': Chinese military
reacts to PM Modi's boundary row
comments**

The two sides have so far held 21 rounds of corps commanders-level talks to resolve the standoff

PTI

Beijing, The Chinese military on Thursday said the situation along the India-China border "at present" is "generally stable" and both sides have maintained "effective" communication to resolve the military standoff in eastern Ladakh.

Defence Ministry spokesman Senior Colonel Wu Qian was reacting to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent interview with Newsweek magazine in which he had expressed hope that through positive and constructive bilateral engagement at the diplomatic and military levels, India and China will be able to restore and sustain peace and tranquillity at their borders.

"At present, the situation in the border areas between China and India is generally stable," Wu said. "Both the sides have maintained effective communication through diplomatic and military channels had positive constructive dialogue and achieved positive progress," he said while responding to a question on Modi's remarks and also Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's reported comments that India will continue to have dialogue with China to resolve the standoff at the border areas.

Wu said that "both sides have agreed to reach a mutually acceptable solution as soon as possible" to resolve the standoff.

In his interview, 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.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning in her response to Modi's interview on April 11 said sound and stable China-India relations serve the interests of both countries and are conducive to peace and development in the region and beyond.

Relations between India and China are frozen except for trade ever since the eastern Ladakh border standoff erupted on May 5, 2020, following a violent clash in the Pangong Tso (lake) area. The eastern Ladakh standoff has resulted in a freeze of bilateral ties on all fronts except trade. The two sides have so far held 21 rounds of corps commanders-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 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 state of the borders remains abnormal.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 29-4-2024

**Talks with China going on smoothly,
India will never bow down:
Rajnath Singh**

The minister said the Modi government is committed to ensuring that defence items, whether missiles and other weapons, bombs or tanks, should be made in India and by Indians

PTI, Ahmedabad

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Sunday said talks between India and China are going smoothly and in a good environment, and India will never bow down.

Singh, who is in Ahmedabad to campaign for BJP candidates contesting the Lok Sabha elections, said India has become a powerful country from a military standpoint and wants to maintain good relations with its neighbours.

"India is no longer a weak India. India has also become a powerful country from a military point of view. We want to maintain good relations with our neighbouring countries," the minister said when asked about Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's accusation against the Narendra Modi government over Chinese aggression.

Talks between India and China are going on smoothly and in a good environment over whatever issues there are, he said.

"I understand that we should wait for the outcome of the talks. But I want to assure the countrymen that India has not bowed down anywhere, nor will it ever bow down," he said.

Singh also expressed confidence that India's defence exports, which crossed the Rs 21,000 crore mark in the financial 2023-24, will increase going forward.

"In 2014, we exported Rs 600 crore defence items, but now the figure has crossed Rs 21,000 crore, and I can say that it is going to increase," he said.

The minister said the Modi government is committed to ensuring that defence items, whether missiles and other

weapons, bombs or tanks, should be made in India and by Indians.

"Today, we have achieved defence production worth more than Rs 1 lakh crore," he said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 22-4-2024

China's Xiaokang project keeps India on its toes

The whole gamut of border management merits a holistic review. It ought to be the key component of the National Security Strategy, which still remains a work in progress.

Maj Gen GG Dwivedi (Retd)

Former Defence Attache to China

THERE have been frequent reports about China building modern border villages and getting them inhabited. On March 28, the 65th anniversary of the Tibet takeover by China, Beijing organised several celebratory events in the new villages in proximity to the India and Bhutan borders. As per latest inputs, China is set to develop 175 more border villages in addition to 628 'Xiaokang' (well-off villages) already in place.

In the garb of border area development, the Xiaokang initiative is centred on expansion through coercion. The model was proposed by Deng Xiaoping in 1979 to ensure equitable development of the Chinese society through poverty alleviation in rural areas. President Xi Jinping has transformed it into a strategic one through the integration of border regions with the mainland, thereby enhancing security of its land boundaries, particularly in Tibet, opposite Arunachal Pradesh. As part of the Xiaokang scheme, 427 model villages have been constructed on the frontline, while 201 are in the second tier. These villages are spread across 21 border counties to include important towns of Xigaze, Lohka, Nyingchi and Ngari. In Lohka, which shares a border with Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, China has developed 354 'prosperous' border settlements. Almost a third of these villages have been built in the close proximity of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). A sum of approximately \$4.6 billion was allocated for the construction of these habitats, including supporting infrastructure.

Under the outcomes of the 19th Party Congress held in October 2017, Xi had called for talented Chinese citizens to work in the remote ethnic minority areas — the underlying design being primarily to change the demographic profile. Over the past decade, Han population in Tibet has risen by about 12 per cent. The ultimate aim of the communist regime is to achieve complete Sinicisation of the Tibet Autonomous Region. All border villages have been provided with quality amenities like roads, electrification and even Internet connectivity, especially in areas bordering India, Nepal

and Bhutan. Additionally, around 206 industrial projects are under construction.

By 2021, the Tibet road network covered 1,18,000 km. Preliminary work on Hotan-Xigaze, Gyirong-Xigaze and Chengdu-Wuhan-Shanghai high-speed railway lines has been completed. The 14th Five-Year Plan aims to build a world-class Chengdu-Chongqing airport cluster, besides upgrading 39 civilian airports. Currently, a dozen airports are operational or under construction in Tibet-South Xinjiang. The new 1,078-km 'Snow Mountain Oil Dragon Pipeline' from Golmud to Lhasa will raise the number of oil depots in Tibet to 10.

China has introduced two national laws in recent years to bolster border management. The National Defence Law, passed in 2021, provides the People's Liberation Army (PLA) a greater role in conjunction with civil agencies to further national interests. A year later, the Land Border Law was passed so as to consolidate Chinese hold over encroached areas. Its Articles 10 and 43 challenge the status quo with regards to the development of border infrastructure, which has a direct bearing on India's border development programmes. China has launched a cartographic offensive against India, showing Ladakh, Barahoti and Arunachal Pradesh as its territories. Giving Mandarin names to places in these areas is part of China's 'Three Warfare' strategy, encompassing propaganda, psychological and legal dimensions.

In July 2021, Xi paid a visit to Lhasa, the first by a head of state in the past three decades; he sought to make Tibet an 'ironclad shield'. Accordingly, border villages have been integrated into the PLA's overall defence plans to act as forward posts, especially in disputed areas like Doklam and Long Ju. Former military personnel of Han ethnicity are being settled in the border areas. China's actions are in sync with its 'Grey Zone Warfare', wherein civilians and militia forces engage in non-contact warfare. A case in point is Beijing's modus operandi in the South China Sea. In the absence of a clear policy, India's border areas remained underdeveloped, especially opposite China. It is only after China's massive infrastructure development in Tibet and Xinjiang that India began upgrading its roads and surface communications in border regions. The Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP) was launched last year to provide requisite facilities to the people living in border villages. Accordingly, 168 villages along China's border that are lacking connectivity are set to be linked by the year-end. A budgetary allocation of

Rs 4,800 crore has been made to create adequate infrastructure in 663 border villages of 19 districts. In sharp contrast to the Chinese-controlled Xiaokang, the Indian programme envisages a 'hub and spoke' template, which is driven by the district administration and gram panchayats; the role of the Central Government is limited to funding. The main focus of the VVP is on the promotion of socio-economic initiatives.

However, there is a need to adopt a dual-use approach by incorporating security aspects as well.

India is also undertaking large infrastructure projects, including frontier highways, rail lines, airports, the Dibang hydroelectric power projects and waterways. These are funded under the 'Gross Budgetary Assistance' provision amounting to Rs 12,882.2 crore for the holistic development of the northeastern region. Given the disputed boundary and the ongoing standoff in Ladakh, the Chinese plan has serious strategic ramifications. Beijing's intent to unilaterally alter the status of LAC will gain further impetus with the Xiaokang villages in place. China has also disregarded the 'Political parameters and Guiding Principles for the settlement of the boundary issue' agreement of 2005 (Article VII), wherein the existing arrangement of the population along the borders is not to be disturbed.

To effectively counter Chinese expansionist designs, there is a need for a de novo approach. Our current reactive approach, based on 'tit for tat', is passe. The whole gamut of border management merits a holistic review. It ought to be the key component of the National Security Strategy, which ironically still remains a work in progress.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 26-4-2024

US imposes sanctions on over a dozen companies, 3 from India, for trade and ties with Iran

The US Department of Treasury says these companies, individuals and vessels have played a central role in facilitating and financing the clandestine sale of Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles to Russia's war in Ukraine

PTI

Washington, The United States slapped on Thursday sanctions on over a dozen companies, individuals and vessels, including three from India, for facilitating illicit trade and UAV transfers on behalf of the Iranian military. The US Department of Treasury said these companies, individuals and vessels have played a central role in facilitating and financing the clandestine sale of Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Russia's war in Ukraine.

While Sahara Thunder has been identified as the main front company that oversees Iran's commercial activities in support of these efforts, the three India-based companies to have been slapped with sanctions for supporting Sahara Thunder are Zen Shipping, Port India Private Limited, and Sea Art Ship Management (OPC) Private Limited.

Iranian military entity Sahara Thunder relies on a vast shipping network involved in the sale and shipment of Iranian commodities on behalf of Iran's Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) to

multiple jurisdictions including the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russia and Venezuela, the Treasury said. "Sahara Thunder has entered into time-charter contracts with India-based Zen Shipping and Port India Private Limited for the Cook Islands-flagged vessel CHEM (IMO 9240914), which is managed and operated by UAE-based Safe Seas Ship Management FZE," it said. "Sahara Thunder has used the CHEM to conduct multiple shipments of commodities since 2022. Iran-based Arsang Safe Trading Co. has provided ship management services in support of several Sahara Thunder-related shipments, including those by the CHEM," the Treasury said.

According to the Treasury, Iran-based Asia Marine Crown Agency has served as the port agent in Bandar Abbas, Iran supporting several Sahara Thunder shipments.

"India-based Sea Art Ship Management (OPC) Private Limited and UAE-based company Trans Gulf Agency LLC have worked together to provide ship management services in support of Sahara Thunder. The UAE and Iran-based Coral Trading EST. have purchased Iranian commodities from Sahara Thunder," it said.

"Iran's Ministry of Defence continues to destabilise the region and world with its support to Russia's war in Ukraine, unprecedented attack on Israel, and proliferation of UAVs and other dangerous military hardware to terrorist proxies," said Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian E Nelson.

"The United States, in close coordination with our British and Canadian partners, will continue to use all means available to combat those who would finance Iran's destabilising activities," he said.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 30-4-2024

Khalistan slogans at event attended by Justin Trudeau

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) described the raising of the slogans at the event as 'disturbing' and said it illustrated once again the political space that has been given in Canada to 'separatism, extremism and violence'

PTI, New Delhi

"The Government of India's deep concern and strong protest was conveyed at such disturbing actions being allowed to continue unchecked at the event," it said.

"This illustrates once again the political space that has been given in Canada to separatism, extremism and violence," the MEA said in a statement.

It added: "Their continued expressions not only impact India-Canada relations but also encourage a climate of violence and criminality in Canada to the detriment of its own citizens."

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 19-4-2024

‘India is top-tier security partner’: Australia in first national defence strategy

Rezaul H Laskar

Australia perceives India as a “top-tier security partner” and is giving priority to practical and tangible cooperation between the two sides that contributes to Indo-Pacific stability, according to the maiden national defence strategy released by Canberra. The document, issued by the Anthony Albanese government on Wednesday, states that Australia will support India’s key role in the region by enhancing defence cooperation. Australia will also seek opportunities with India to drive bilateral and multilateral cooperation, defence industry cooperation and information-sharing. The national defence strategy aims to bolster the Australian Defence Force (ADF)’s deterrence and warfighting capabilities in the Indo-Pacific, including by building stronger partnerships with key countries. Defence minister Richard Marles has said Australia plans to hike military spending by \$50.3 billion over the next decade and hit \$100 billion by 2033.

“India is a top-tier security partner for Australia. Through the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Australia and India, the Government is continuing to prioritise practical and tangible cooperation that directly contributes to Indo-Pacific stability,” the document stated in the section devoted to the Indian Ocean region.

“Australia will continue to support India’s key role in the region by increasing the depth and complexity of our defence cooperation. The Government will continue to seek opportunities with India to drive practical bilateral and multilateral cooperation, defence industry cooperation and information sharing,” it said.

India and Australia, both members of the Quad grouping that includes Japan and the United States, have witnessed a marked uptick in their defence and security cooperation in recent years. In addition to a range of military training exercises, India and Australia also participate in the annual Malabar naval exercise with the other two Quad members.

In 2020, India and Australia signed the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA), which allows both sides to access each other’s military bases for logistical support. Much of the military cooperation has been driven by shared concerns about China’s aggressive behaviour across the region.

The national defence strategy said Australia must work with key partners such as Japan, South Korea and India that “share our concerns and are prepared to strengthen cooperation in support of shared interests”.

Describing the northeastern Indian Ocean as central to Australia’s security and sea lines of communication, the

document said the Australian side will engage with several other countries in this region.

In addition to engaging with India, Australia’s defence cooperation in the Indian Ocean will focus on regularising the ADF’s presence, including increasing deployments, training and exercises with Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh, and bolstering regional maritime domain awareness.

The ADF will also continue to integrate with the US and “key partner defence forces – particularly Japan, Indonesia, India, the Republic of Korea, the UK, France, Germany, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines – to coordinate our collective strengths and minimise gaps in our global security engagement”, the document said.

However, the document acknowledged the “risk of a crisis or conflict in the Taiwan Strait is increasing, as well as at other flashpoints, including disputes in the South and East China Seas and on the border with India”. There is also increasing competition for access and influence across the Indian Ocean, including efforts to secure dominance over sea lanes and strategic ports.

The document also pointed to India’s strained relations with China and Pakistan. “There remains potential for tension and miscommunication between India and Pakistan, and between India and China – with the risk of nuclear weapons use or proliferation a factor in each potential flashpoint,” it said.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 17-4-2024

Ties with BD too strong to be disturbed by any campaign: Shringla

Diplomatic Correspondent

Former Indian foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla has said that India-Bangladesh relation is in a satisfactory stage and must move forward in every aspect including the line of credit.

"I'm not worried about the "boycott India" campaign in Bangladesh as I observed that the bilateral relationship is too strong to be disturbed by such a movement," Harsh Vardhan Shringla was replying to a question in an online show where the presenter asked him about the boycott India campaign in Bangladesh and Maldives.

He termed the Bangladesh-India relation a "very strong and positive affinity." "We have removed most of the irritants of the relationship. We have to continue to maintain the momentum," Shringla said.

"India-Bangladesh relation is in a satisfactory stage and must move forward in every aspect including the line of credit," he said, adding that Prime Minister Modi termed the relations a golden chapter.

"I have worked very closely in the last decade and a half. I can very safely tell you that people of both these countries by and large have a very strong and positive affinity and outlook to India," he said, adding that

people of Bangladesh travel to India for tourism, for medical purposes, and for ensuing education of "certain kinds" in India, among others.

Similarly, he said, in Maldives, every commodity from groceries to vegetables and eggs everything goes from India under the government to government agreement mechanism.

He said the Indian foreign policy is always aimed at improving people-to-people ties.

"Whatever we do we ensure the people of the country always have regard to India in a positive manner."

He also highlighted the neighbourhood first policy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and said 50 per cent of the Indian line of credit is directed to the neighbourhood including Bangladesh.

The neighbouring countries, such as Bangladesh, got a preference in vaccine distribution and were exempted from the recent ban on onion exports, he said.

He said trade facilitation is giving dividends in the region.

Electricity cooperation with Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh will flourish. An undersea electricity cable to Sri Lanka can bring long-term stability to the island nation, he said.

Responding to a question on the non-implementation of Indian projects under the line of credit, he said every country has credit absorption capacity, which also applies to Chinese credit.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 22-4-2024

BD, India trade thru Banglabandha,

Tamabil land ports resume

Business Correspondent

Export-import and immigration activities between Bangladesh and India through Banglabandha and Tamabil land ports resumed on Saturday after two days of suspension due to Indias Lok Sabha election.

UNB adds from Panchagarh: Banglabandha land port here resumed operation on Saturday after three days stopped as the reason of Lokshova election in India.

All Export-Import and immigration activities in Banglabandha land port was suspended from April 17 to 19 as the movement of goods between Bangladesh and India were suspended through the land port after Jalpaiguri district Magistrate Sama Parvin declared three days of stoppage of all operations due to Lokshova election in India. On 20 April, the export -import and immigration activities in two countries have reopen , Banglabandha landport limited Manager Abul Kalam Azad and police super S.M.Sirajul Huda have said the reopen of Banglabandha landport from Saturday. BSS adds from Sylhet: Export-import and immigration activities through Tamabil land port in Sylhet resumed on Saturday after two days of suspension due to Indias Lok Sabha election.

Runu Mia, in-charge of Tamabil Immigration Police, said the import-export and immigration activities at Tamabil land port remained suspended on Thursday and Friday on the occasion of the 18th general election of India.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 23-4-2024

A landmark visit gives BD-Qatar ties a big boost

The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, arrived on a two-day state visit by a special flight at the invitation of the Bangladesh President Mohammed Shahabuddin and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday evening.

Unquestionably, it is a landmark visit that is scheduled to ink as many as 11 cooperation documents - 6 agreements and 5 MoUs.

However, this is not the first visit by a Qatari Emir to Bangladesh for the first time. Then the Emir of Qatar, Shaikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani also visited Bangladesh in April of 2005. The latest high-level visit is taking place after 19 years. At the same time, the Emirs visit also is the first high-level state visit of a leader of any Middle East country after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina assumed office in January, 2024. The State of Qatar diplomatically recognised Bangladesh as a sovereign State on March 4, 1974 following the 2nd OIC Summit held in February 1974. Bangladesh opened its diplomatic mission in Doha in 1975. The State of Qatar appropriately reciprocated by opening its diplomatic mission in Dhaka in 1982.

On a broader ground, bi-lateral relations between Bangladesh and Qatar are based on mutual respect, shared values, common religious ground, shared culture, and tradition. People-to-people contacts are one of the dominant features of our bilateral ties. More than 400,000 Bangladeshis work in Qatar and our workers have largely been acknowledged as sincere and hard working by their Qatari counterparts. On that note - we expect the Qatari Emirs latest state visit to result in recruiting more Bangladeshi workers by the Qatar government.

Over the years our bi-lateral ties have strengthened and expanded, and signing of multiple new MOUs and agreements only confirms the fact. Now it is encouraging to note that both countries are looking forward to take bi-lateral ties to the next stage through broader co-operation in the areas of manpower, energy, trade, and investment. Moreover, Bangladesh and Qatar consider each other as important development partners in materialising Bangladeshs Vision 2041 and Qatars vision 2030.

Nevertheless, the Qatari Emirs milestone visit is taking place at a critical time against the backdrop of growing tensions in the Middle East. On one hand, innocent Palestinians continues to embrace death to brutal Israeli

military onslaught while on the other mounting warlike escalation between Israel and Iran is threatening an all-out regional war by dividing the Muslim Ummah. Understandably, Apart from areas of cooperation on the bilateral front, global issues, including Palestine-Israel, will also be discussed where Bangladesh will highlight its position.

We expect both countries to take a common stance on all global issues.

We sincerely desire Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani's visit to be mutually beneficial and a success for both countries.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 28-4-2024

China, Sri Lanka forging stronger bonds

By Lu Yang

Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena met his Chinese counterpart Li Qiang at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on March 26.

In ancient times, Sri Lanka was a centre of trade in the Indian Ocean and is now an important partner for China in South Asia. Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, paid a six-day visit to China from March 25-30.

In October 2023, President Ranil Wickremesinghe, attended the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in China. President Xi Jinping had an in-depth exchange of views with him and arrived at an important consensus on developing China-Sri Lanka relations.

Gunawardena's visit continues the trajectory of this consensus of friendly and supportive bilateral relations. He met President Xi and Premier Li Qiang and other top Chinese officials, besides attending the Boao Forum. The visit confirmed a new chapter in the relationship between Sri Lanka and China, amid the changing strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific region.

BRI framework

Sri Lanka is recovering from the economic crisis it faced in 2022. China is one of Sri Lanka's largest creditors. Central to the discussions during Prime Minister Gunawardena's visit was the exploration of avenues for bolstering economic collaboration between the two countries. China has supported Sri Lanka in debt relief, humanitarian emergency assistance and in extending financial assurances to help Sri Lanka obtain the IMF Extended Fund Facility Arrangement.

Gunawardena highlighted the opportunities for investment in Sri Lanka, including in the Colombo Port City and the Hambantota Industrial Zone, which are flagship infrastructure projects of the Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka.

China's assistance in infrastructure development contributes to the economic growth and connectivity of Sri Lanka in the long run. Beginning in 2014, the Colombo Port City project has been under construction

for 10 years. It is the largest foreign direct investment project in Sri Lanka to date and the Government regards it as a "lifeline" for economic recovery. After its completion, it will become a high-end urban complex integrating finance, tourism, logistics and information technology in South Asia. The Colombo International Container Terminal, also invested in by China, currently brings more than 40 percent of traffic to the Colombo Port, making it one of the busiest ports in the world.

The state visit President Xi paid to Sri Lanka in September 2014 was a historic landmark in China-Sri Lanka relations. Since then, Sri Lanka has been participating in the Belt and Road Initiative, which offers many opportunities to further advance infrastructure development and economic prosperity in Sri Lanka. In addition to infrastructure development, BRI has extended to new areas such as "Green Silk Road", "Health Silk Road" and "Digital Silk Road", which provide multiple channels of cooperation in agriculture, health care, clean energy, environment and the digital economy between the two countries. E-commerce in Sri Lanka has grown rapidly over the years. In 2023, Sri Lanka developed a digital economic strategy that plans to expand Sri Lanka's digital economy from 3.5 to 15 percent by 2030. This will be a promising area that welcomes Chinese expertise and investment.

China assured continuous support to Sri Lanka's efforts for political and socioeconomic development. The spirit of the Rubber-Rice Pact, signed in 1952, five years before the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, got special mention when Xi met Gunawardena.

The Rice-Rubber Pact was the first trade agreement signed by China with a non-communist country. Under the agreement, Sri Lanka supplied natural rubber and China reciprocated with rice at a time when both countries suffered difficulties buying the two items from the international market.

The Pact was initially only for five years, but was renewed on six occasions and in effect for 30 years until 1982. It was the most beneficial and successful trade agreement negotiated by Sri Lanka. China appreciates this action of Sri Lanka offering natural rubber during an era when other rubber-producing countries declined its supply to China because of pressure from Western countries.

President Xi has said that China is willing to work with Sri Lanka to carry forward the spirit of the Rubber-Rice Pact, which is characterised by "independence, self-reliance, solidarity and mutual assistance", to consolidate political mutual trust, expand practical cooperation, and advance the high-quality Belt and Road cooperation.

Addressing common challenges

Prime Minister Gunawardena's visit to China underscores the enduring commitment of Sri Lanka and

China to strengthening their strategic cooperative partnership across multiple fronts. A number of bilateral cooperation documents was signed in industrial investment, standardisation, livelihood assistance, agriculture, media and other areas this time. China will encourage more competent Chinese enterprises to invest and do business in Sri Lanka, and is willing to increase imports of quality agricultural products from Sri Lanka. It will provide a favourable investment and business environment for Chinese enterprises and accelerate preferential policies for integrated development projects in Colombo Port City and the Hambantota Port.

In addition to enhancing economic ties, Prime Minister Gunawardena's visit provided an opportunity for both nations to address common challenges and concerns. As members of the international community, Sri Lanka and China face common concerns such as sovereignty and territorial integrity, climate change, maritime security, and regional stability. By deepening their strategic cooperative partnership, and signalling their commitment to pursuing an independent foreign policy and multilateralism, Sri Lanka and China seek to contribute to a more balanced and inclusive regional order in the Indo-Pacific.

Maritime affairs are important between the two countries. According to the Joint Statement, they will strengthen their coordination and exchanges in fields including disaster prevention and mitigation, maritime rescue, relief and research, maritime domain awareness, marine biological diversity, maritime personnel training and capacity building.

The scale of the brain drain leaves a worrying gap in Sri Lanka's economic recovery. The country faces a lack of professionals in areas such as IT, medical staff and engineering. Both sides expressed a readiness to further enhance exchanges in the education sector, as well as to strengthen personnel training and scientific exchanges. The China-Sri Lanka Joint Centre of Science and Education under the Chinese Academy of Sciences will begin operation, making it an important step in this direction.

Enduring bonds

Prime Minister Gunawardena's diplomatic visit to China signifies a reaffirmation of the enduring bonds Sri Lanka and China share, grounded in peace, mutual respect and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. As Prime Minister Gunawardena returns from his diplomatic sojourn, the seeds of friendship and collaboration sown during his visit are poised to bear fruit in the people of China and Sri Lanka, shaping the trajectory of mutually supportive bilateral relations and contributing to a more prosperous and interconnected world.

The writer is a research fellow at the Institute of the Belt and Road Initiative, Tsinghua University.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 25-4-2024

Uma Oya Project with multiple benefits inaugurated

Countries of the Global South are establishing their identity: President Ranil:

Committed to strong partnership with Sri Lanka: President Raisi:

The "Uma Diya Janani" multipurpose development project, marked as a significant irrigation initiative following the Mahaweli movement, was officially handed over to the public yesterday morning (24) by the Presidents of Iran and Sri Lanka. Iranian President Dr. Ibrahim Raisi, attending the event at President Ranil Wickremesinghe's invitation, received a warm welcome.

During the ceremony, both leaders unveiled a commemorative plaque and inaugurated the project, initiating the operation of electricity generators through digital technology. President Ranil Wickremesinghe expressed gratitude to Iran for their indispensable support, highlighting that without it, Sri Lanka couldn't have diverted water from Uma Oya to Kirindi Oya. He emphasised Sri Lanka's commitment to strengthening ties with Iran.

Reflecting on the shared aspirations of the Global South for their unique identity and independence, President Wickremesinghe stressed the importance of solidarity among these nations.

"Iran's technological prowess has spread across all fields. It should also be said that Iran is a country that maintains its own technological development. Therefore, we should strengthen the common points of both countries. We are all countries of the Global South. Such projects are very important at a time when the countries of the Global South are establishing their identity and independence," President Wickremesinghe said.

President Ibrahim Raisi of Iran underscored that the project symbolises not only the friendship between Iran and Sri Lanka but also signifies enhanced co-operation, integration, harmony, and unity among Asian nations.

The President of Iran affirmed Iran's readiness to foster a strong partnership with Sri Lanka and expressed Iran's willingness to contribute to Sri Lanka's progress and development through the provision of technical and engineering services for large-scale projects.

Iran's President Dr. Ibrahim Raisi, accompanied by Iran's First Lady Jamile Sadat Alamolhoda, arrived in Sri Lanka from the Mattala Airport yesterday morning (24) to attend the inauguration of the Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project. Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena and other Ministers welcomed the Iranian delegation.

President Raisi's one-day official visit to Sri Lanka, at the special invitation of President Ranil Wickremesinghe, marks the first visit by an Iranian President since former Iranian President Mohammad Ahmadinejad's visit in April 2008.

As part of his visit, the Iranian President left a commemorative message in the guest book at the Mattala International Airport.

The Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project (UOMDP) stands as a flagship initiative of national significance in Sri Lanka. Its primary aim is to divert approximately 145 million cubic meters (MCM) of excess water annually from the Uma Oya basin to the Kirindi Oya basin, addressing the issue of water scarcity in the South-Eastern dry zone without adverse effects on the environment or water sources.

This initiative will facilitate irrigation for around 4,500 hectares of new land and 1,500 hectares of existing agricultural land in the Moneragala district. Additionally, it will fulfil the drinking and industrial water requirements of Badulla, Moneragala, and Hambantota areas, providing approximately 39 million cubic meters (MCM) of water annually. Furthermore, the project will contribute to the national electricity supply by generating 290 gigawatt hours (290 GWh) of electrical capacity each year.

Key components of the project include the construction of two reservoirs, Puhulpola and Dayaraba, a 3.98 km connector tunnel linking the reservoirs, a 15.2 km main tunnel, an underground power plant, transmission lines, and associated infrastructure. The project was undertaken by Iran's FARAB Engineering Company, with a total contract value of US\$ 514 million and it commenced on March 15, 2010.

The Export Development Bank of Iran (EDBI) initially contributed US\$ 50 million in funding until 2013. However, owing to international sanctions imposed on Iran, the EDBI was unable to continue its financial support for the project. Accordingly, the Government of Sri Lanka opted to advance the project using state funds in collaboration with the respective contractor, FARAB Company.

When the project commenced on March 15, 2010, it was originally slated for completion by March 15, 2015. However, various challenges arose, including technical issues such as unexpected water ingress into the Headrace tunnel, social impacts, financial obstacles, global crises like the Covid-19 pandemic during construction. Consequently, the completion date of the project has been extended to March 31, 2024, along with an extension of the warranty period until March 31, 2025. The basic phase of operations concluded in February and March 2024 while linking the units 01 and 02 to the national grid successfully. Trial operations were commenced on April 1, 2024.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 20-4-2024

Beijing's message: Won't tolerate anti-China activities in Nepal

Parties and stakeholders should be involved in projects, CPC leader tells Nepali Maoists.

Anil Giri

Kathmandu, A senior leader of the Communist Party of China warned that Beijing will not tolerate any third-country activities in Nepal targeting China.

During a meeting on Thursday with the general secretary of the ruling CPN (Maoist Centre), Dev Gurung, who is currently in Beijing on a 10-day visit, Liu Jianchao, minister of the International Department of the CPC Central Committee (IDCPC), told Gurung and the Maoist delegation that Beijing will not tolerate any actions in Nepal by third countries targeted against China.

The IDCPC is in charge of maintaining relations with political parties of other countries, especially fellow communist parties.

A jumbo delegation from the Maoist Centre is currently in China at the invitation of the IDCPC and it held talks with Liu and other leaders in Beijing on Thursday and Friday.

"We are in favour of world peace," Liu told Gurung and the visiting Maoist delegation. "If any country tries to act against China in Nepal, we will not tolerate it."

But Liu, who is being spoken of as the next foreign minister of China, did not name the country, Gurung told the Post over the phone from Beijing.

Earlier in January-end, Sun Haiyan, vice-minister of the IDCPC, made similar remarks in Kathmandu during a roundtable with major party leaders. Sun had alleged that some countries were trying to disrupt development cooperation between Nepal and China and defame bilateral relations.

"...Some criticise our relations. Some are trying to sabotage our bilateral relations and some have increased activity against China," Sun had said during a consultative conference in Kathmandu between Nepali political leaders and the Communist Party of China. Her statement had sparked a controversy in Nepal.

During their Thursday meeting, Gurung told Liu that Nepal is quite aware about the elements trying to destabilise Nepal-China relations and creating misunderstanding and conflict between the two countries.

"Their [Liu's] focus was mostly Western countries but he did not name any particular country," said Gurung, adding that Nepal's priority is stability and it will continue to focus on the principles of Panchasheel.

Besides discussing what China wants to see in Nepal, other issues included Nepal's failure to present a list of projects to be executed under the Belt and Road Initiative, according to Gurung.

Liu also proposed involving political parties and other channels including stakeholders to facilitate the execution of various Chinese initiatives in Nepal, Gurung said.

This is the first-of-its-kind proposal from Beijing whose blueprint remains unknown.

Beijing is also displeased with the progress on the BRI, delays in implementing Chinese-funded projects in Nepal, and the slow progress of projects undertaken by the Chinese contractors and firms.

“We and our party thwarted attempts to destabilise our relations with China in the past, and the current government led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal will check such attempts in the future too,” Gurung conveyed to the IDCPC team.

Besides Liu, other senior IDCPC leaders including Sun were present at the meeting.

“Liu said that any military or security activities in Nepal targeting China will not be tolerated. Any move by a third country inside Nepal targeting China is not acceptable to China,” Gurung quoted Liu as saying.

Gurung said he assured the Chinese leaders that Nepal is committed to one-China policy and will not allow any activities detrimental to China’s security interests.

In his remarks, Liu told the visiting Maoist delegation that Beijing is pleased with the new political equation in Nepal and stressed the need for unity among Nepal’s leftist parties, said Gurung.

This is not the first time that China has encouraged unity among leftist parties in Nepal in general and pushed for unity between the CPN-UML and the CPN (Maoist Centre) in particular. In 2018, too, Beijing pushed for the unity between the UML and Maoist Centre.

The two parties merged to be the Nepal Communist Party, but that unity did not last beyond three years. Once again, Beijing is encouraging similar unity after the UML and the Maoist Centre partnered to form a new government in March first week after Prime Minister Dahal ended his alliance with the Nepali Congress.

But UML leaders have been dismissing the chances of a new leftist unity. Recently, UML Chairman KP Oli outright rejected the idea of unity between communist parties of Nepal.

“At present, unity among leftist parties is not a necessity,” Oli said while addressing the UML’s parliamentary party on Monday.

He, however, said that “there is a need for cooperation among the forces that are in favour of good governance and national unity.” There is also an opposition voice in the Maoist Centre on the potential unity between the UML and Maoist Centre.

“We are pleased with the formation of government through partnership between UML, Maoist Centre and other communist parties,” Gurung quoted Liu as saying.

“The unity between the two communist parties is good for the Nepali people. We want a stable communist government in Nepal,” Gurung said, again quoting Liu.

“We want to see the leftist parties of Nepal united for the greater stability and prosperity of the country. We also believe that Nepal’s prosperity lies in the hands of communist forces. We are always in favor of stability and development and stand ready to provide all possible support to Nepal,” Gurung quoted Liu as saying at the meeting.

It is natural for any communist party in the world to favour unity among the communist parties in other parts of the world, Gurung said.

“Liu said, in recent years, under the joint leadership of President Xi Jinping and Nepali leaders, relations between the two countries have continued to develop,” the IDCPC said in its statement released on Friday.

“The Chinese side supports the Nepali side in exploring a development path that suits its national conditions, and is willing to help Nepal prosper and develop.”

“The CPC attaches great importance to its friendly relations with the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Center). Under the new situation, it is willing to expand exchanges between the two parties, deepen exchanges and mutual learning of experience in state governance and administration, and promote practical cooperation between the two sides in agriculture, investment, infrastructure, border trade and tourism through ‘political party + [plus]’ and other channels, so as to push China-Nepal relations to a new level,” said the statement.

Liu in the meeting had expressed his displeasure at Nepal’s failure to present a list of projects to be developed under the BRI and as per the agreements signed between two sides after 2016 including during the state visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Nepal in 2019 October.

Gurung thanked the Chinese side for its long-term support in safeguarding Nepal’s sovereignty and independence and achieving economic and social development, according to the Chinese statement.

“The Nepali side firmly adheres to the one-China principle and does not allow any force to use Nepal’s territory for anti-China activities. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Center) highly admires the CPC’s governance achievements and governance concepts, and is willing to further strengthen exchanges between the two parties, deepen theoretical exchanges, promote Nepal-China relations for healthy development, and promote regional peace, and development and stability,” the IDCPC statement read.

THE RISING NEPAL, KATHMANDU 25-4-2024

Qatar Amir, PM discuss cooperation for prosperity

By Pallav Bhusal

Kathmandu, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' and His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Amir of Qatar, held bilateral talks in the capital on Wednesday.

The discussions centred on cementing the bond between Nepal and Qatar, underlining the importance of mutual cooperation for the prosperity of both nations.

On the occasion, Prime Minister Prachanda highlighted investment potentials in Nepal with a special focus on agriculture, tourism and infrastructure sectors.

Acknowledging Qatar as a steadfast friend of Nepal, Prime Minister Prachanda emphasised the deepening and expanding nature of their relations, extending beyond governmental levels to the people. He expressed optimism that the ongoing high-level visit would further enhance mutual relations.

"The friendship extended by Qatar to Nepal has been steadfast. Our ties are evolving and reaching a new height. This bond transcends governmental connections, resonating deeply with our people," said PM Prachanda.

Prime Minister Prachanda projected Nepal as a highly attractive investment destination, citing its potential in various sectors such as agriculture, energy, tourism, and technology. He highlighted Nepal's investment-friendly environment and invited a high-level delegation from Qatar to participate in the upcoming investment summit slated for April 28 and 29 in Nepal.

"There is immense potential to export bottled drinking water globally, given Nepal's abundant sources of pure drinking water," said PM Prachanda.

Furthermore, Prime Minister Prachanda advocated for Qatar's involvement in promoting Nepal's tourism infrastructure, including the operation of flights from additional cities like Lumbini and Pokhara. He emphasised the need to update bilateral agreements and understandings to align with current demands.

"I request the Qatar government to consider operating flights to and from Lumbini and Pokhara international airports as well," said PM Prachanda.

"Nepal continues to be the focal point for global tourism," said Prime Minister Prachanda. "Investments in Nepal's tourism infrastructure on an international scale will yield significant returns," he added.

PM Prachanda underscored the impact of Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulla Al Thani's successful ascent of Mount Everest in May 2013 in boosting Nepal's tourism profile.

Addressing concerns about migrant labour, Prime Minister Prachanda proposed the establishment of vocational training and skill development centres in Nepal to prepare workers for employment opportunities

in Qatar. He reiterated Nepal's commitment to ensuring safe and dignified foreign employment for its citizens. Economic development emerged as a priority for Nepal, with Prime Minister Prachanda expressing hope for Qatar's assistance in large-scale infrastructure projects, including hydropower generation and healthcare facilities.

Additionally, Prime Minister Prachanda urged Qatar to take initiatives for the safe release of Bipin Joshi and called for an end to the conflict in West Asia, stressing the importance of restoring peace in the region.

"I request the Qatar government's assistance in ensuring the swift and safe release of Bipin Joshi, an innocent Nepali student who went missing following the Hamas attack in Israel," said Prime Minister Prachanda. He further added, "I humbly draw His Highness's attention to this urgent matter."

Hari Lamichhane, the press coordinator of Prime Minister Prachanda, stated that His Highness Sheikh Tamim responded positively to the Prime Minister's proposals regarding investment destinations, highlighting the potential across sectors such as agriculture, energy, tourism, information technology and sports.

He said his visit had opened an avenue for Qatari investment in Nepal.

His Highness Sheikh Tamim expressed Qatar's intention to research potential areas of investment across different sectors and to pursue collaboration in those sectors.

The Amir of the State of Qatar said that the projects could be forwarded after conducting intensive discussions.

Additionally, he responded positively in expanding direct flights to and from Pokhara and Lumbini International airports.

The Qatari Amir also lauded the significant contribution of Nepali workers to Qatar's development, expressing admiration for Nepal's efforts and pledging to cooperate with Nepal in solving the problems of Nepali migrant workers.

He also reiterated Qatar's commitment to assisting in enhancing the skills of Nepali workers by supporting the establishment of vocational training and skill development centres in Nepal.

The Amir of the State of Qatar said they were positive to help rescue Nepali student Bipin Joshi.

It is the first high-level visit from Qatar after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Nepal and Qatar in 1977.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 25-4-2024

U.S. says Washington is not in direct talks with Iran on JCPOA

TEHRAN- Vedant Patel, deputy spokesperson for the U.S. State Department, refrained from commenting on

communication channels between Washington and Tehran, saying, “We are not in direct negotiations with Iran on the JCPOA.”

Patel, responding to a question about reports of reviving talks on lifting sanctions on Iran, said, “I will not comment on our communication channels with Iran, but I must say that we are not in direct negotiations with Iran in New York or anywhere else on the JCPOA.”

Patel, in response to another question about the State Department’s human rights report and the situation of journalists, said, “I do not want to refer to any specific section of the human rights report.”

The deputy spokesperson for the State Department continued to make anti-Iranian accusations, stating, “However, everyone knows that the Iranian government is one of the largest exporters of terrorism in the world. At the same time, the Iranian government completely ignores a free and open media environment. In the past three years, you have witnessed severe repression of media institutions, journalists, and media professionals in Iran. We will continue to take action to hold the Iranian government accountable for human rights violations and destructive behavior.”

He emphasized, “Negotiations on lifting sanctions with the countries that are members of the JCPOA are being pursued by Ali Bagheri Kani as Iran’s senior nuclear negotiator.”

Nasser Kanaani, the spokesperson for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, also said in April about the status of talks on lifting sanctions, “The Islamic Republic of Iran has always used all its diplomatic capacities to secure the rights of the people, especially in the matter of lifting unjust sanctions by the U.S. against the Iranian people.”

He stated, “It was not the Islamic Republic of Iran but America that undermined diplomatic efforts. Even America’s partners in the JCPOA were unable to fulfill their commitments and compensate for the illegal unilateral withdrawal of the U.S. from the JCPOA.”

Kanaani continued by saying that the issue of lifting unjust sanctions is raised on the sidelines of international meetings and in meetings with parties that can play a role in the JCPOA and negotiations on lifting unjust sanctions, and the viewpoints of the Islamic Republic of Iran are presented.

The Washington Free Beacon announced in April that the Biden administration did not extend the sanctions waivers that allowed Iran to engage in nuclear cooperation with international parties within the framework of the JCPOA.

The Biden administration allowed a set of sanctions waivers that allowed Iran and Russia to engage in joint cooperation to expire, but did not commit to implementing those sanctions.

During Donald Trump’s presidency, these waivers were revoked due to the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA,

but Joe Biden announced after entering the White House that he would issue such waivers.

Iran fulfilled all its commitments under this agreement one year after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA to give European countries, which promised to compensate for the effects of Washington’s withdrawal from the agreement, the opportunity to work towards fulfilling their promises.

However, since European countries did not fulfill their promises, Iran reduced its commitments under the JCPOA in several steps. The reduction of Iran’s commitments was based on the provisions of the nuclear agreement.

The Democratic administration of Joe Biden, after taking office in January 2021, condemned the unilateral actions of the previous administration to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal with the P5+1 group, but so far has fallen short of taking any valid action to rectify past wrongdoings and has adopted the maximum pressure policies of Trump administration.

The Biden administration, which claimed to have a diplomatic approach towards Iran and to strive for a return to the JCPOA, has not only failed to return to the JCPOA but has repeatedly imposed sanctions against Iran under the pretext of Iran’s defensive programs, including ballistic missiles, drones, nuclear activities, and human rights.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 25-4-2024

U.S. slaps fresh sanctions against Iran over alleged cyber crimes

TEHRAN- The Treasury Department and the State Department said on Tuesday that the United States government has imposed charges and penalties on four Iranian nationals in connection with an alleged multi-year cyber operation that targeted over a dozen American firms.

Additionally, the Treasury Department issued sanctions on two firms, Dadeh Afzar Arman and Mehrsam Andisheh Saz Nik, which it claimed employed the individual defendants and served as front organizations for Iran’s Revolutionary Guard cyber command.

The business targets, according to federal prosecutors in Manhattan, were mostly defense contractors with access to confidential data; other targets included an accountancy firm and a hotel company located in New York.

“These actors targeted more than a dozen U.S. companies and government entities through cyber operations, including spear phishing and malware attacks,” the U.S. Treasury Department said in a statement.

The defendants, according to the prosecution, used spearfishing—a tactic that entails deceiving email recipients into clicking on harmful links—and

impersonating women to win over people's trust in order to infect computers with malware.

Prosecutors alleged that over 200,000 employee accounts at the accountancy business and over 2,000 employee accounts at the hotel company were hacked. The purported misconduct transpired from 2016 to 2021.

Prosecutors added that the four defendants—Hossein Harooni, Reza Kazemifar, Alireza Nasab, and Komeil Salmani—are all at mid-to late-30s.

In reaction to Tehran's retaliatory operation against the Israeli regime earlier this month, the United States and the United Kingdom declared last week that broad penalties would be placed on Iran's military drone program.

The Israeli airstrike, which took place in Damascus's Mezzeh district, resulted in the deaths of seven military advisors from the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC). Iranian officials have vowed a decisive response to what they described as a violation of international obligations and conventions.

The assault drew sharp rebukes from governments and foreign ministries, citing violations of international law and diplomatic norms.

Zahra Ershadi, Iran's deputy permanent representative to the UN, told the 15-member Security Council that Iran reserves the right "to take a decisive response" to the attack, saying Israel violated the founding UN Charter, international law, and the inviolability of diplomatic and consular premises.

Israel's crime clearly breached the basic principles of diplomatic and consular immunity, as well as the 1961 Convention on Diplomatic Relations, the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, and the 1973 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes, the diplomat stated.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the strike, adding that the Israeli regime is responsible for the attack, which led to the martyrdom of seven Iranian military advisors in Syria.

"The Secretary-General reaffirms that the principle of the inviolability of diplomatic and consular premises and personnel must be respected in all cases in accordance with international law," spokesman Stephane Dujarric said, AFP reported.

The Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei issued a statement, saying Israel will "regret" its criminal act.

While the majority of member states united in condemning the Israeli aggression, the staunch Western supporters of the regime chose not to denounce the act. This decision led to renewed accusations of hypocrisy and a lack of moral integrity against them.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 30-4-2024

US may engage with Taliban amid Afghan humanitarian crisis

AT News

KABUL – In a significant shift of approach, the United States is signaling a readiness to deepen its engagement with the Taliban-led government of Afghanistan. This strategic move comes as the Biden administration grapples with balancing human rights concerns and the urgent need to address the country's devastating humanitarian crisis.

Karen Decker, chargé d'affaires of the US mission to Afghanistan, highlighted this shift, emphasizing the detrimental impact of isolation on both the Afghan people and the broader region. Speaking from the sidelines of a recent donor meeting in Istanbul, Decker underscored the necessity of pragmatic engagement over isolationist policies.

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan has been plunged into a deepening humanitarian emergency exacerbated by economic turmoil and aid cutbacks. With millions of Afghans in dire need of assistance, the United States is reevaluating its stance, opting for a policy of pragmatic engagement with the Taliban-led government.

However, this shift is not without its challenges. The Taliban's continued imposition of restrictive measures, particularly concerning women's rights and media freedoms, has raised concerns among Western capitals and international NGOs. Despite these reservations, there is a growing recognition that avoiding engagement with the Taliban will not address Afghanistan's complex humanitarian issues.

Decker emphasized the need for a delicate balance between engagement and upholding principles, particularly regarding humanitarian assistance and human rights. She outlined ongoing efforts by US officials based in Qatar to engage with Taliban representatives, primarily focusing on delivering aid directly to the Afghan people through local and international partners.

Nevertheless, navigating engagement with the Taliban remains intricate, as NGOs and aid organizations must operate within the constraints imposed by the Taliban's regulations. Despite these challenges, Decker noted some progress, citing the absence of famine in Afghanistan as a positive outcome of aid efforts.

Critics, however, remain skeptical of increased engagement with the Taliban, citing ongoing human rights abuses and the risk of legitimizing the group's authority. Nonetheless, proponents argue that ignoring the Taliban will only exacerbate the suffering of millions of Afghans in need.

Looking ahead, the United States maintains clear red lines, insisting on tangible changes from the Taliban to be considered an official government. While

development assistance remains a point of contention, Washington remains cautious, emphasizing the need for substantive policy shifts from the Taliban.

In a complex and evolving landscape, the path forward for US-Taliban engagement remains fraught with challenges. Yet, amidst the turmoil, there exists a growing recognition of the imperative to address Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis through dialogue and pragmatic engagement, albeit with cautious optimism for tangible progress.

THE KABUL TIMES, KABUL 27-4-2024

Deputy PM Beradar, Iranian special envoy for Afghanistan discuss enhancing bilateral relations

KABUL: The Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Mullah Abdul Ghani Beradar Akhund, in a meeting with Hassan Kazemi Qomi, Islamic Republic of Iran's ambassador to Kabul and Special Representative of that country's President, discussed enhancing political, economic, commercial, and transit ties between the two countries, his office said in a statement the other day. The meeting was attended by the Acting Minister of Water and Energy, Mullah Abdul Latif Mansoor, the Acting Minister of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, Mawlawi Atullah Omari, the Acting Minister of Information and Culture, Mullah Khairullah Khairkhwa, and Afghanistan's Ambassador to Tehran, Mawlawi Fazl Mohammad Haqqani, the statement said. The meeting discussed several issues including bolstering political, economic, commercial, and transit ties between the two nations, as well as enhancing bilateral cooperation across various sectors, the statement further said. Stressing the importance of collaborative efforts to further strengthen bilateral ties between the two neighboring countries, Beradar Akhund said: "Thanks to the blessings of Allah Almighty, the region experienced heavy rainfall. Consequently, after enduring several years of drought, the water of the Helmand River has now reached Nimruz province and Sistan in Iran," the statement quoted Beradar as saying. He stated that the development is expected to alleviate the challenges faced by the local populace and called for enhanced transit facilities for Afghan goods destined for European countries through Iran, citing it as an essential measure to elevate transit and trade levels between both nations. The deputy PM also raised concerns about Afghan refugees residing in Iran, urging the Iranian authorities not to forcefully repatriate them and advocating for improved coordination between both nations in the field.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 19-4-2024

No statement on Indian target killing does not mean we are sleeping: Dar

Foreign Minister Senator Ishaq Dar said that no statement on Indian target killing does not mean that we are sleeping

By News Desk

ISLAMABAD: Foreign Minister Senator Ishaq Dar said on Thursday that no statement on Indian target killing does not mean that we are sleeping.

In an informal conversation with the media at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ishaq Dar said that a special meeting of the World Economic Forum would be held in Saudi Arabia on April 28 and 29. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Dar will attend the special meeting.

After the World Economic Forum meeting, the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) will have a meeting in Gambia. On May 2 and 3, there will be a meeting of OIC Foreign Ministers and he will represent Pakistan. He said the OIC summit will be held on May 4 and 5 and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif will attend the summit and will raise the issue of Palestine and Kashmir.

He said on Wednesday there was a meeting with the partners in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs when the Afghan foreign minister phoned to congratulate him. Dar invited him to visit Pakistan and he would go to Afghanistan when the time comes.

On the question of India's target killings in Pakistan, the foreign minister said if there is no statement on Indian target killings, it does not mean that we are sleeping.

Dar said that the visit of Saudi delegation to Pakistan was welcome but some political parties were playing politics on the visit which was sad.

The steps taken by the government for foreign investment have been appreciated by the Saudi delegation. "Our foreign affairs policy guideline is peace and we want peaceful solutions to problems. We are leading towards economic diplomacy," he asserted.

Talking about the visit of Iranian president to Pakistan, the foreign minister said that the visits of the head of state are not planned immediately. The visit of the president of Iran to Pakistan was pre-arranged while the situation between Iran and Israel has just arisen and this visit has nothing to do with it. The Iranian president's visit will take place on April 22, 23 and 24. He said Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman has been invited to visit Pakistan. There is hope that the visit will take place.

Meanwhile, US Ambassador Donald Blome met Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar to discuss recent events in the region. The US ambassador conveyed the United States' commitment to working with the government

and people of Pakistan, underscoring that prosperity and security for Pakistan remain a top priority for the United States.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 21-4-2024

CPEC gave boost to Pak-China ties: PM

Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD - Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif on Saturday said that the economic and cultural relationships between Pakistan and China were being rapidly growing due to China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

In a message on global observance of Chinese language as one of the largest dialects for communication, he said that a sufficient number of Pakistanis were learning the Chinese language which was further cementing ties between the people of the two countries.

The United Nations (UN) observed the UN Chinese Language Day every year on April 20 to highlight the contribution of Chinese literature, poetry and language in world culture.

The prime minister observed that steps were being taken at the official and public sectors levels to promote the Chinese language and literature so that the people to people contacts between the two countries could be further strengthened, PM Office Media Wing said in a press release.

Today was the observance of the Chinese language as the global language, he said, adding that the dialect had been an exponent of centuries old Chinese culture.

In the last few decades, China had been proving its mettle in economic prosperity besides, the Chinese language and culture had been becoming popular across the globe, he added.

Prime Minister Sharif said no doubt, today, the Chinese language had become the largest tool of communication in the world and the UN had included it into the list of its official communication language.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 26-4-2024

No tensions with Pakistan, insists US State Dept

Anwar Iqbal | Baqir Sajjad Syed

WASHINGTON / ISLAMABAD: The US State Department emphatically declared on Thursday that there's 'absolutely no' undercurrent of discord between the United States and Pakistan, despite recent sanctions imposed on companies allegedly supplying missile components to Islamabad.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Office on Thursday dismissed the assessment of Pakistan's human rights situation in the recently launched US State Department's Human Rights Report as "unfair and politically motivated" and criticised it for lacking objectivity.

"Pakistan continues to be one of our most important partners in the region," Principal Deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said, addressing concerns about potential tensions arising from the sanctions, during the daily news briefing.

Responding to queries, Patel said: "There continues to be a lot of cooperation that we have with the government of Pakistan, especially in the security space and trade sector."

Foreign Office dismisses US report on human rights situation in Pakistan

He recalled that the Pakistani finance minister was in Washington last week and held consultations with members of the State Department. "This is a robust relationship, and we look to continue strengthening it," he added.

Last week, the Biden administration imposed sanctions on three Chinese and one Belarusian companies for allegedly supplying dual-use components for Pakistan's missile programme, a charge Islamabad rejected as incorrect.

However, on Tuesday, Patel clarified during his daily briefing that the sanctions were imposed because these entities were "proliferators of weapons of mass destruction and the means of their delivery".

He said that on October 23, the United States had also designated three Chinese entities for allegedly supplying components to Pakistan's missile programme.

"We're going to continue to disrupt and take actions against proliferation networks and concerning weapons of mass destruction procurement activities wherever they may occur," he declared.

FO rejects US report

The 2023 US Human Rights Report on Pakistan underscored a concerning status quo in human rights violations, with no notable improvements. The report alleged a range of serious issues, including unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, torture, harsh prison conditions, arbitrary arrests and a lack of fair public trials, all indicative of a broader culture of impunity.

In its response on Thursday, the Foreign Office said: "The US State Department's annual exercises of preparing such unsolicited reports lack objectivity and remain inherently flawed in their methodology. These reports use domestic social lens to judge human rights in other countries in a politically biased manner."

The report alleges that government forces were frequently implicated in abuses, along with severe restrictions on freedoms of expression, assembly, and media — manifested through censorship and violence against journalists.

The FO criticised the report for exhibiting double standards, arguing that such attitude undermined the discourse on international human rights.

"It is deeply concerning that a report purported to highlight human rights situations around the world

ignores or downplays the most urgent hotspots of gross human rights violations such as in Gaza and Indian Occupied Jammu & Kashmir,” the FO stated, emphasising that only a report with political motivations could neglect the grave conditions in Gaza, including the weaponisation of humanitarian aid and the killing of over 33,000 civilians.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 30-4-2024

PM, Saudi Crown Prince agree to boost cooperation

Agencies

Shehbaz Sharif calls debt trap ‘a death trap’ Says Pakistan’s revenue sector is in tatters, power sector in a shambles Thanks Saudi Arabia, USA, UK, Gulf courtiers for helping Pakistan in testing times Invites Malaysian businessmen to visit Pakistan Claims Pak-Saudi economic ties entered new era.

RIYADH - Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Saudi Arab’s Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud met here Monday and agreed to strengthen broad-based cooperation in various fields.

In a meeting held in Riyadh, the two sides expressed satisfaction over the progress with regard to the decisions taken during their earlier meeting in Makkah. PM Sharif thanked the Saudi Crown Prince for recently sending a high-level delegation to Pakistan under the leadership of the Saudi Foreign Minister.

He appreciated the interest shown by the Crown Prince in sending more delegations to Pakistan to boost investment in diverse fields. The prime minister expressed gratitude to the Crown Prince for the excellent hospitality extended to him during his visit to Saudi Arabia and for the comprehensive programme with regard to the Saudi investment in Pakistan.

PM Sharif reiterated his invitation to the Saudi Crown Prince to visit Pakistan. The situation in Gaza also came under discussion during the meeting. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif Monday said permanent peace in Gaza is imperative for peace in the world.

He was speaking at the plenary meeting of the special session of World Economic Forum on the theme of “Rejuvenating Growth”. He said, “The world will not be in peace unless there is a permanent peace in Gaza.”

As he talked about Gaza, the audience in the hall responded with resounding applause. He said the conflict in Ukraine brought to the world skyrocketing commodity prices, and Pakistan could not import and procure vital raw materials for industry and agriculture. “On top of that inflation is breaking the back of developing countries,” he said. Coupled with that, Pakistan faced devastation in 2022 due to huge unimaginable floods. The prime minister said, “Pakistan is one of those countries which have nothing to do with the reasons leading to climate change. Our contribution to emissions is not even fraction of one percent.” Due to

the catastrophic floods in Pakistan, large swathes of land were submerged, millions of houses and animals were washed away, and stagnant water brought water borne diseases all across the country, he continued. He said his government spent Rs 100 billion from scarce resources for relief and rehabilitation of the flood affectees. “We are grateful to the friendly countries including Saudi Arabia, Gulf countries, the United Kingdom, the United States and many other countries for their support at a difficult time.”

Pakistan’s economy suffered losses of 30 billion dollars because of the floods and then it approached international entities in Geneva and other places and had to borrow loans at expensive rates due to the natural disaster which was not its fault, he mentioned. “Our country was hit in a way which I had not seen in my life time,” he remarked.

He gave the example of his family to express his determination and resolve to put Pakistan on the road to progress and prosperity. He said his father and his brothers were sons of a poor farmer in undivided India and they migrated to Lahore, Pakistan at the time of partition.

With the sheer dint of hard work, in 1965 his father and family raised the largest steel engineering company in Pakistan but it was nationalized on January 2, 1972, he said, adding his family stood up and accepted the challenge and in next 18 months set up six new small factories to avoid further nationalization.

He said global north and south were dependent on each other and had to work together to face the present challenges. The prime minister said after taking over reins of the country early this year, he was determined to put things in order. Talking about the issues facing Pakistan, he said the power sector was in a shambles due to massive electricity theft and an elitist culture was doling out to those who did not deserve it. He told that for the first time in the country’s history after getting credible input from agencies he removed high level officers who were not functioning well and had grey records.

“Our revenue sector is in tatters and what we receive annually in revenue, we lose four times due to leakages in the system. Unless we plug loopholes we will not recover from our problems in revenue collection,” he explained. He said there were also problems of inflation and debt trap which was a “death trap”.

He said, “I acknowledge from the core of my heart the support of Saudi leadership for Pakistan for overcoming economic challenges. A friend in need is a friend indeed.” He appreciated the UK’s Department for International Development for its outstanding support for Pakistan in sectors of health and education in the past. He said his government was going for deep rooted structural reforms and meaningful austerity. Pakistan had a very young population - millions of boys and girls

- which was not only a challenge but also a great opportunity, he added.

“Youth is our biggest asset and we have to provide them with modern tools and technology including education in information technology and artificial intelligence and vocational training so that they can become self earners and establish small and medium size businesses and contribute in the nation building efforts in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.” Talking about his goals to achieve economic progress, he said his government would promote agriculture through modern technology and by providing the best seeds and fertilizers to farmers. “A huge task is ahead of us and we have to go for higher exports and incentivize our exporters and utilize our mineral resources and fertile land,” he added. He reiterated that Pakistan could achieve its rightful place in the comity of nations with hard work and untiring efforts.

Also, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has appreciated the keen interest shown by Saudi Arabia in exploring ways and means to increase economic partnership between the two brotherly countries. He expressed these remarks during his meetings with the Ministers of Energy, Economy, and Planning, and Environment, Water, and Agriculture of Saudi Arabia on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum Special Meeting in Riyadh. During the meeting with Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman Al-Saud, the Prime Minister highlighted the initiatives undertaken by the government of Pakistan to facilitate and streamline processes for investments in the energy sector of Pakistan.

He underscored various avenues available for energy cooperation between the two brotherly countries, which included building new and improving existing energy infrastructure, increasing focus on renewable energy, and bringing efficiencies across the entire energy ecosystem.

The Energy Minister of the Kingdom acknowledged the deep historic fraternal ties between the two countries and highlighted the important role played by Pakistan in the development of the Kingdom. The Saudi side showed keen interest in developing energy projects identified by the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister welcomed the interest shown by the Kingdom to enhance economic partnership with Pakistan.

He said that following his meeting with Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman, both sides are pursuing the economic cooperation agenda with renewed vigor and commitment. He expressed hope that the technical teams of the two countries would complete their work and many mutually beneficial projects would be launched soon. The Prime Minister also applauded the vision of the Kingdom and the remarkable transformation that has taken place, making Saudi Arabia a hub of economic growth and development. Later, Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif held meetings with Minister of Economy and Planning Faisal

Al-Ibrahim and Minister of Environment, Water, and Agriculture of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Abdulrahman Abdulmohsen Al-Fadley. He highlighted the potential of the Pakistani agriculture sector and underscored that Pakistan can become a breadbasket for the Kingdom and could play a critical role in ensuring food security not only for the two countries but for the entire region. The Saudi Minister for Environment, Water, and Agriculture briefed the Prime Minister on the fruitful discussions that he and his delegation held in Islamabad. He said that the Saudi agriculture companies are looking at Pakistan with great interest and hoped that both countries would benefit from joint ventures for improving the value chain of the agriculture economy. He underscored that the Kingdom values Pakistan’s strategic and competitive advantages in the field of agriculture and considers the Pakistani agricultural sector as a significant area of cooperation.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 30-4-2024

Joint Border Policing

The first outcomes of the Iran-Pakistan engagement are here and we must be pleased to see the commitment translated into action very quickly. Though there is still some time till a comprehensive joint security framework pops up to counter the menace of terrorism in the shared border areas, the appointment of colonel-level liaison officers from both countries is quite something. Agreed upon in January when both countries avoided a near mishap and escalation, it is good to see practical steps being taken with good intent and resolve.

Terrorism in the border provinces is a common problem and well-wishers on both sides have long pushed for common solutions. Liaison officers will ensure that better coordination happens and crises are averted well in time. This is exactly what both countries need, to begin with. However, we must keep our eyes on the security pact that is yet to be announced. A joint border patrol will be a good initiative if agreed upon. Putting an official ban on the terrorist outfits present along the border is already being considered. If finalised, this will be another major step towards joint counter-terrorism efforts. The level of resolve and maturity shown by Pakistan and Iran in the wake of the January tit-for-tat strikes have multiplied after the visit of the Iranian President. These agreements are historic since joint counter-terrorism has been a very sought-after area of cooperation. This must expand to include regular sharing of intelligence and joint operations as and when needed in the Balochistan-Sistan region. This is the only way to surveil the frequent and easy escapes the terrorists find into each other’s country.

Making a fully functional joint border surveillance mechanism will take time but for now, the appointment of liaison officers is something to cheer. Manpower will enhance gradually and with soft measures like setting up

border sustenance markets, re-integration of rogue elements via alternate employment and earning will be possible. The process has started and a consistency in commitment will take it a long way.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 19-4-2024

Pakistan remains steadfast in collaborating with China for peace, connectivity, prosperity: president

ISLAMABAD, (Xinhua) -- Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari said on Thursday that Pakistan always remains steadfast in collaborating with China to advance shared goals of fostering peace, connectivity, prosperity and maintaining stability.

"The enduring strategic and all-weather friendship between Pakistan and China is a cornerstone of stability in the region," the president said when addressing the joint session of the country's parliament in the capital Islamabad.

The president expressed gratitude to the Chinese people and leadership for their unwavering support of Pakistan in various fields during difficult times.

Zardari reiterated the country's resolve to complete the ongoing China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, and said, "We will not allow hostile elements to jeopardize this vital project (CPEC) or undermine the strong bond between our two nations and will take all necessary measures to ensure the security of our Chinese brothers and sisters."

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 20-4-2024

China calls US 'overcapacity' claims economic bullying, as Chinese officials sharpen criticism of latest slander

By Wang Cong and Yin Yeping

China on Friday markedly sharpened its criticism of the US' accusation of overcapacity in China, saying that the claim, while sounding like an economic concept, is a disguise for its malign attempt to curb China's industrial development and amounts to economic coercion and bullying, and urged Washington to be prudent in words and deeds and refrain from imposing additional tariffs.

The latest remarks from Chinese officials underscored their intensifying efforts to counter some US and European officials' attempt to create a pretext for taking further protectionist and punitive actions against Chinese products and firms, while also calling for global cooperation and dialogue to tackle global issues such as production capacity, experts noted.

Notably, Chinese top leaders have also commented on the production capacity issue over the past week.

On Tuesday, President Xi Jinping met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Beijing. During the meeting, Xi said it is important for the two countries to stay vigilant against the rise of protectionism, adopt an objective and dialectical view on the issue of production capacity through a market and global perspective and based on the laws of economics, and devote more efforts to discussions on cooperation, according to Xinhua.

Also on Tuesday, during talks with Scholz, Chinese Premier Li Qiang offered a detailed response to claims of overcapacity. Li stressed that the issue of production capacity should start from economic laws and be viewed objectively and dialectically from a market viewpoint and a global perspective, Xinhua reported.

China's new-energy industry has gained advantages through self-improvement and sufficient market competition, rather than government subsidies, Li said. He expressed hopes that the EU side will uphold market-oriented and fair principles, and prudently use trade remedy measures.

The remarks clearly demonstrate China's approach of addressing global challenges through cooperation, rather than politicization of economic and trade issues and protectionism, experts said.

"The remarks are aimed at urging all parties to tackle global challenges through cooperation, instead of looking at some issues from one's own self-interests," Zhou Mi, a senior research fellow at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, told the Global Times on Friday.

But as US officials continued to hype "overcapacity" claims and even threatened to impose tariffs and other actions against Chinese products, Chinese officials also ramped up their pushback against the accusations. This week, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, who focused on the overcapacity accusations during her trip last week, even threatened that the US wouldn't take "anything off the table," including additional tariffs on cheap goods from China.

Commenting on the US' accusation of overcapacity at a regular press briefing in Beijing, Lin Jian, a spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry, said that such claims are not new, as the US has long accused China of overcapacity due to its exports of a large amount of high-quality, affordable products to the world.

"The so-called overcapacity claim raised by the US seems to be an economic concept, but behind it is a vicious attempt to curb and suppress China's industrial development. It aims to seek a more favorable competitive position and market advantage for itself. It is blatant economic coercion and bullying," Lin said.

Also on Friday, Lin responded to US President Joe Biden's calls for substantially higher tariffs against Chinese steel products during a speech in the US steel production base of Pittsburgh on Wednesday. Biden also accused China of offering subsidies to expand steel production capacity, which harms US businesses.

In response, Lin said that the claims made by the US side are completely untrue and could harm China-US economic and trade relations. "China is seriously concerned and strongly dissatisfied with this," he said, "China will take all necessary measures to resolutely defend its rights and interests."

Dangerous narrative

The intensifying pushback from Chinese officials against the accusations both reflected their respect for market laws, as well as efforts to safeguard not only China's interests but the stability of the world economy, Zhou said. "If the US continues to mislead the public on this issue, it will be very detrimental to global economic and trade cooperation and recovery," he said.

US officials' accusation of overcapacity has been harshly criticized by economists both in China and abroad as being in defiance of economic laws.

Lü Xiang, a research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, told the Global Times that the groundless allegation of "overcapacity" by some US politicians defied economic rules, and was aimed at providing a cover for US companies with backward capacity, such as those that make internal combustion engine cars.

"Taking electric cars as an example, the current global capacity cannot meet the surging demand of the global transformation for new energy, and there is about 70-80 percent room for growth in the sector," said Lü. According to estimates by the International Energy Agency, global demand for new energy vehicles is projected to reach 45 million units by 2030, 4.5 times the figure from 2022. Similarly, global demand for newly installed photovoltaic capacity is expected to reach 820 gigawatts by 2030, approximately four times the 2022 level, according to media reports. For solar panels, the demand for newly installed capacity will likely quadruple. These figures mean the current level of production capacity for new-energy products lags far behind demand.

This highlights significant potential demand for new energy products in many developing countries, experts said.

The overcapacity accusation also puzzled some Western economists. Nicholas Lardy, a senior fellow at Washington DC-based think tank the Peterson Institute for International Economics, told Xinhua last week that the concept of excess capacity is "potentially harmful."

Lardy noted that there is no way of measuring overcapacity, and the US' suggestion that no country should produce more of a product than could be sold domestically does not make sense.

"So Boeing should cut its production? US soybean farmers should limit their production to what can be sold within the US? The US appears to have a comparative advantage in these products so why shouldn't Boeing and US farmers produce more than can be absorbed domestically, with the 'excess' exported?" he said.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 19-4-2024

China rejects U.S., Japan, Philippines concern on South China Sea

BEIJING, (Xinhua) -- Relevant countries' groundless accusation and deliberate smears against China on the South China Sea issue are unacceptable, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said on Thursday.

Spokesperson Lin Jian made the remarks at a regular news briefing when asked to comment on a statement issued by the United States, Japan and the Philippines after their trilateral summit. The statement expressed so-called "serious concerns about China's behavior in the South China Sea" and called on China to abide by the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal.

Lin said China strongly opposes the practice of bloc politics by relevant countries, firmly opposes any acts that stoke and drive up tensions and harm other countries' strategic security and interests, and is seriously against forming exclusive groupings in this region.

Noting that the award of the South China Sea Arbitration is illegal, null and void, he said China does not accept or take part in the Arbitration, does not accept or acknowledge the so-called award, still less does China accept any claim or action that is based on the award.

Lin said the South China Sea Arbitration and its illegal award harm the interests of countries in the region, including the Philippines.

"No matter how some may try to frame the South China Sea issue, the issue remains what it is," Lin said, adding that no political manipulation disguised as legal moves will go anywhere or deter China from safeguarding its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.

Lin said China will continue to firmly safeguard its lawful rights in accordance with domestic and international laws. "We urge relevant countries to be sober-minded and change course instead of going further down the wrong path," he added.

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THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 29-4-2024
**Lok Sabha polls phase 3: Know about
the voting day, total seats &
constituencies**

HT News Desk

The first two phases of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections are over. The first phase took place on April 19 across 102 constituencies. The second phase was held on April 26 in 89 constituencies. According to the data provided by the Election Commission, a voter turnout of 62% was recorded in the first phase of the elections and around 60.96% (provisionally) in the second phase.

In the first phase of the elections on April 19, the total number of candidates in the fray was 1,625. In the second phase held on April 26, 1,198 candidates contested the elections.

According to the Election Commission, a total of 1,351 candidates will contest in the third phase of the Lok Sabha elections.

Lok Sabha elections 2024: 3rd phase polling date

Voting for the third phase of the Lok Sabha elections will occur on May 7.

Lok Sabha elections: Total number of seats

A total of 94 Lok Sabha seats across 12 states and Union Territories will go to polls on May 7.

All 26 seats of Gujarat will vote in a single phase on this day.

Lok Sabha elections: Constituencies that will go for elections in phase 3

Assam: Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Gauhati

Bihar: Jhanjharpur, Supaul, Araria, Madhepura, Khagaria

Chhattisgarh: Sarguja, Raigarh, Janjgir-Champa, Korba, Bilaspur, Durg, Raipur

Goa: North Goa, South Goa

Gujarat: Kachchh, Banaskantha, Patan, Mahesana, Sabarkantha, Gandhinagar, Ahmedabad East, Ahmedabad West, Surendranagar, Rajkot, Porbandar, Jamnagar, Junagadh, Amreli, Bhavnagar, Anand, Kheda, Panchmahal, Dahod, Vadodara, Chhota Udaipur, Bharuch, Bardoli, Surat, Navsari, Valsad

Karnataka: Chikkodi, Belgaum, Bagalkot, Bijapur, Gulbarga, Raichur, Bidar, Koppal, Bellary, Haveri, Dharwad, Uttara Kannada, Davangere, Shimoga

Madhya Pradesh: Bhind, Bhopal, Guna, Gwalior, Morena, Rajgarh, Sagar, Vidisha

Maharashtra: Baramati, Raigad, Osmanabad, Latur (SC), Solapur (SC), Madha, Sangli, Satara, Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg, Kolhapur, Hatkanangle

Uttar Pradesh: Sambhal, Hathras, Agra (SC), Fatehpur Sikri, Firozabad, Mainpuri, Etah, Budaun, Aonla, Bareilly

West Bengal: Maldaha Uttar, Maldaha Dakshin, Jangipur, Murshidabad

Dadra and Nagar Haveli/Daman and Diu: Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu

Jammu and Kashmir: Anantnag-Rajouri

Lok Sabha elections 2024: When will the results be announced?

The Lok Sabha polls are being held in seven phases beginning on April 19, and the counting of votes will take place on June 4.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 30-4-2024

**At 71.27%, Kerala LS polls' voter
turnout records dip from '19**

HT Correspondent

The state's highest turnout of 78.41% was recorded in Vatakara constituency in north Kerala where a fierce two-cornered fight between UDF and LDF

Kerala recorded a voter turnout of 71.27% in the April 26 Lok Sabha polls across the state's 20 parliamentary constituencies, the latest update of the Election Commission (EC) stated on Monday, indicating a decline of 6.5 percentage points in the final polling figure from the 2019 turnout of 77.84%.

According to the EC data, of the 2,774,9158 eligible voters in the state, 19,777,478 persons exercised their franchise. Women, who outnumber men in the state's population, also polled more votes than the males. While 9,475,090 of the voters were men, 10,302,238 were women.

The state's highest turnout of 78.41% was recorded in Vatakara constituency in north Kerala where a fierce two-cornered fight between United Democratic Front's (UDF) Shafi Parambil and Left Democratic Front's (LDF) KK Shailaja played out in the polls.

The lowest turnout of 63.37% was recorded in Pathanamthitta constituency in southern Kerala, which was witness to a triangular contest between incumbent UDF MP Anto Antony, LDF rival and former finance minister TM Thomas Isaac and BJP's debutant Anil K Antony.

There were region-wise disparities in the turnout figures. While constituencies in north Kerala saw relatively high turnouts such as Kannur (77.21%), Wayanad (73.57%) and Kozhikode (75.52%), all five in southern part of the state saw less than 70% polling. Thiruvananthapuram, which was the cynosure of all eyes at the national level for the fierce contest between UDF's Shashi Tharoor and NDA's Rajeev Chandrasekhar, saw a paltry turnout of 66.47%. In 2019, the turnout in the constituency was 73.45%, an increase of 7 percentage points.

In terms of gender, women outnumbered men in voting in 18 of the 20 constituencies of the state. The exceptions were only in Kottayam and Idukki where a marginal higher percentage of male voters were seen. The highest number of women voters and the biggest difference between male and female voters was seen in Vatakara constituency. Women formed 54% of the total number of those who voted on April 26. Of the 1,114,950 who voted, 607,362 were women and 507,584 were men. The turnout while remarkable is not surprising since the contest was between Parambil, a 41-year-old leader of Congress and one of the party's popular youth icons, and Shailaja, the state's former health minister and CPM's prominent woman face.

Compared to the 2019 polls, the turnout in this election in Kerala has come down by over 6 percentage points. Several factors are being cited by political experts and leaders for the decline in polling such as absence of a 'clean' voter list, the prevailing extreme heat conditions, lack of enthusiasm on the part of youth to take part in the democratic process and dissatisfaction with alleged slow voting process.

J Prabhash, former professor of political science at Kerala University, held that while the turnout was less than 2019 polls, it could still be considered as a decent one. "If it had gone below 65%, then yes, we could have said the turnout was bad. But in this case, it's still above 70%, so it's decent. However, yes, there has been a decline when compared to the last Lok Sabha polls," he said.

"One of the factors I believe for the decline was that the electoral list was not clean. The names of those who had died and others who were absent in the state for long periods have not been cleared. Another is that a lot of young people have stayed away from the democratic process for different reasons. Many of them may have migrated abroad, especially in districts like Pathanamthitta, and not returned during the vacations this year as travel tickets are quite expensive," he said.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 30-4-2024

Telangana contest likely between Congress and BJP as BRS struggles

Srinivasa Rao Apparasu

The debacle of the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) in the recent assembly elections in Telangana has paved way for a near-straight fight between the two national parties—the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party in majority of the Lok Sabha constituencies in the state—elections for which are scheduled on May 13. In the assembly elections held on November 30 last year, the fight was mostly between the then ruling BRS led by K

Chandrasekhar Rao and the Congress led by A Revanth Reddy. The Congress came to power by winning 64 seats in the 119-member assembly with a vote share of 39.40%, as against 39 seats of the BRS, which got 37.35% votes.

Though the BJP was in the race for power till early 2023, it was relegated to the third position by the time the assembly elections were held in November. Yet, the party improved its position to a large extent, from just one MLA seat in 2018 to eight seats in 2023, with the percentage of vote share being doubled from 6.98% to 13.90% in a span of five years.

Ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, the BRS received several setbacks, with a large number of its leaders—right from constituency-level leaders, a few MPs and MLAs and senior leaders like BRS parliamentary party leader K Kesava Rao defecting to the Congress and the BJP in the last five months.

The BRS had won nine Lok Sabha seats out of 17 in Telangana in 2019 general elections, but five of them had defected to the two national parties after the party's debacle in the assembly elections. While two of them—P Ramulu from Nagarkurnool and B B Patil from Zaheerabad joined the BJP, the other three—Venkatesh Netha from Peddapalli, Pasunuri Dayakar from Warangal and G Ranjith Reddy from Chevella joined the Congress.

Read: Delhi Police summons Telangana CM Revanth Reddy in Amit Shah's doctored video case on May 1; Modi raises issue

Besides, three MLAs—T Venkat Rao from Bhadrachalam, Kadiyam Srihari from Station Ghanpur and Danam Nagender from Khairtabad defected to the Congress. Many other BRS MLAs have already met chief minister A Revanth Reddy and are expected to join the Congress after the Lok Sabha elections.

Similarly, leaders like Sanampudi Saidi Reddy from Nalgonda and Aroori Ramesh from Warangal, considered to be die-hard loyalists of KCR, defected to the BJP.

"Obviously, defection of so many leaders into the Congress and the BJP eroded the BRS vote base in several constituencies. Even those who were given the party tickets for Lok Sabha elections, like Kadiyam Kavya in Warangal and G Ranjit Reddy from Chevella, have rejected the tickets and are contesting on the Congress tickets. So, the BRS has struggled to find right candidates in the Lok Sabha elections," pointed out political analyst and author Sriram Karri.

The BRS fielded only three of its sitting MPs—Nama Nageshwara Rao in Khammam, M Srinivas Reddy in Mahabubnagar and Maloth Kavitha from Mahabubabad in the current Lok Sabha polls. "In all the remaining 14

seats, except in a few places like Secunderabad, Medak and Alampur, the candidates are either weak or non-serious,” Karri said.

Consequently, Karri said, the BRS would find it difficult to retain the vote share of 37.35% it got in the assembly elections and a large part of it will go to the Congress and the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections.

“The Lok Sabha elections are fought on a different narrative – it will be (Prime Minister Narendra) Modi factor for the BJP and the anti-Modi factor for the Congress. The Telangana sentiment of the BRS doesn’t work out in the present context,” the analyst said.

The BJP, which could win just one assembly seat in the 2018 assembly elections in Telangana, bounced back within five months and won four Lok Sabha seats in the state in April 2019 Lok Sabha elections. “In the last five years, the BJP has gained a lot of ground in the state as was evident from the impressive show in the recent assembly elections in which it won eight assembly seats. We are going to repeat the show in the Lok Sabha elections, too,” claimed BJP state president and Union minister G Kishan Reddy.

During his public rally at Siddipet on April 25, Union home minister Amit Shah exuded the confidence that the BJP would win not less than 12 out of 17 Lok Sabha seats in Telangana. “However, we are confident of reaching the double-digit mark this time – winning at least 10 seats,” a senior BJP leader said on the condition of anonymity.

The BJP, which has declared its candidates much ahead of the Congress, has stepped up its campaign across the state and with several national leaders all set to address a series of rallies in the next two weeks, the party is in an aggressive mood.

While Shah addressed a rally on April 25, BJP national president J P Nadda addressed a rally at Kothagudem on Monday. The Prime Minister will be addressing his first election rally at Zaheerabad on Tuesday. “It is going to be Modi wave in Telangana, as the Congress and the BRS have virtually gone into a silent mode in several constituencies,” Kishan Reddy said on Monday.

On the other hand, the Congress, which has fielded strong candidates in several constituencies, is banking entirely on the charisma of Revanth Reddy, who is making a whirlwind campaign across the state, targeting the BJP primarily and countering the allegations of the BRS on the implementation of the pre-election promises in the last five months. “It is going to be a referendum on the performance of my government in the last five months. I am sure the people have appreciated the implementation of most of the guarantees we have promised and they will not get carried away by the

emotional appeals of the BJP,” Reddy told reporters on Saturday.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 29-4-2024

Poll-time focus on aspirations of J&K, Ladakh residents

Sonam Wangchuk’s campaign has brought global attention to environmental concerns of Ladakh.

Luv Puri

Journalist and Author

POLLING has been completed in parts of the Jammu region, which has two Lok Sabha seats (Jammu and Udhampur), while the three constituencies primarily in Kashmir (Baramulla, Anantnag-Rajouri and Srinagar) and one in Ladakh will go to the polls in May. One needs to pay attention to the issues that have arisen in this border region during the ongoing elections — the first parliamentary battle in J&K and Ladakh since the abrogation of Article 370 on August 5, 2019.

Though the state-turned-UT has only five seats, J&K’s electoral impact on national politics is, at times, disproportionate. It provides an entire mosaic of issues that are leveraged in the Hindi heartland. National security concerns impacted the national elections in 2019 as well as in 1999. The Balakot airstrikes after the Pulwama terror attack gave an edge to the BJP in some states in the 2019 polls, while the victory in the Kargil War helped the party in the General Election held in September-October 1999. Many soldiers serving in J&K come from electorally significant states like Haryana, Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Bihar. While the BJP has repeatedly described the abrogation of Article 370 as its achievement, the narrative on this issue was relatively muted during campaigning for the Udhampur and Jammu seats that went to the polls on April 19 and 26, respectively. The matter has minimal resonance in these areas. The Congress narrative revolved around issues mentioned in its manifesto, including the promise of the restoration of J&K’s statehood.

With regard to the Lok Sabha seats primarily in the Kashmir valley, the implications of the Delimitation Commission report, released in 2022, are becoming evident. The panel merged parts of the Anantnag parliamentary seat with the Muslim-majority Rajouri and Poonch districts, which were earlier included in the Hindu-majority Jammu-Poonch parliamentary constituency. De facto, two culturally distinct Muslim-majority areas on either side of the Pir Panjal mountain range were combined to form a parliamentary constituency (Anantnag-Rajouri). Some observers viewed the previous seat, comprising Hindu-majority

Jammu district and Muslim-majority Rajouri-Poonch belt, as a secularising and stabilising force in a sensitive region.

Moreover, the Anantnag-Rajouri constituency, which goes to the polls in the third phase on May 7, is proving to be a logistical nightmare for the candidates and their parties. For instance, if someone has to travel from Poonch to Anantnag, it takes around 11 hours by road, through the Jammu-Udhampur National Highway 1A or through Reasi district. The only road that connects Jammu's Rajouri-Poonch with the Kashmir valley's Anantnag is the historic Mughal road, but it remains snow-clad for nearly seven months.

The main stakeholders, the National Conference (NC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), have strongly opposed the demand to defer the May 7 poll in Anantnag-Rajouri, even as some parties, including the BJP — which doesn't even have a candidate for this seat — are keen on a postponement. Within the segment, the contest is between NC candidate Mian Altaf, a scion of an influential Gujjar family, and former CM and PDP leader Mehbooba Mufti. Gujjars, with at least one-third presence in Rajouri-Poonch, had opposed the granting of ST status to the Paharis, as they feared that it would eat into their reservation pie. The BJP has not fielded any candidate on the three Muslim-majority seats in J&K.

The NC is the favourite for the Baramulla and Srinagar seats. Party president Omar Abdullah, who is contesting from Baramulla, faces People's Conference leader Sajad Lone, who has electoral influence particularly in the Kupwara area of the constituency. He and the Apni Party's Altaf Bukhari have tried to cobble up a coalition on both seats, but the NC as well as the PDP have labelled them as proxies of the BJP. In Srinagar, the NC has fielded Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi, a Shia cleric, who faces the PDP's Waheed-ur-Rehman Parra, who was arrested in 2020 and jailed for 19 months under the UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act). The NC and the PDP are seeking votes to "restore the dignity of Kashmiris" in Parliament. After a long time, Kashmir-centric issues, such as the release of political prisoners, are part of the poll discourse.

Separated from J&K as a consequence of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019, the Ladakh parliamentary segment, facing the China-controlled Tibetan plateau and Pakistan-controlled Gilgit-Baltistan, has its own issues. The Ladakhi population includes 46.4 per cent Muslims, 39.7 per cent Buddhists and 12.1 per cent Hindus.

In terms of tangible political goals, the leadership in Leh and Kargil demands the application of a North East-centric Sixth Schedule of the Constitution for Ladakh to

protect the fragile ecosystem of the region, as they fear being inundated by outsiders and industrial development. Activist Sonam Wangchuk's campaign, which has given vivid details of the receding glaciers that feed the entire Indus basin and the impact on regional ecology, has brought international attention to the environmental issue. The impact is visible, as the BJP has dropped MP Jamyang Tsering Namgyal and given the ticket to Tashi Gyalson, who is the chairman-cum-chief executive councillor of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council in Leh. Hectic efforts among various stakeholders within the Opposition — Kargil's prominent institutions Islamia School and Khomeni Trust School, and the Congress — are continuing to pick a joint candidate.

A cohesive and participatory relationship between the heartland and the periphery is necessary as an antidote to secessionist demands or ethnic fissures and to ensure sustainable peace. This can only be done by being sensitive to the issues that have been highlighted during the elections and that should inform policymaking in the future.

THE HINDU, DELHI 29-4-2024

Turnout and tropes: On phase two voter turnout and election rhetoric

Voter turnout has been lower in most States compared to the 2019 election

A comparative assessment of polling in the second phase of the general election on Friday, for 88 seats from 13 States/Union Territories, shows that high turnout (more than 70%) in the East and the North East (Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and West Bengal) and low turnout (less than 60%) in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have followed earlier trends. The turnout seems to be lower in Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan too, but any parsing of the reasons should wait for comprehensive post-poll surveys. That said, voter turnout has indeed reduced in comparison to 2019 in the first phase as well, compelling the Election Commission of India to look into whether the heat-wave conditions in many States were responsible. That could be a factor but one cannot rule out the notion that voters seem to be less compelled about their choice this time in comparison to 2019. Considering the fact that the BJP won a comfortable majority and its highest vote share in 2019 coinciding with the higher voter turnout, a lower turnout could be a sign of worry for it, even if, conventionally, a higher turnout has generally been a message about anti-incumbency in earlier polls before the BJP became the pole of the Indian party system.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the lynchpin of the BJP, and whose leadership of the party and the Union government is marshalled by the party as a key campaigning tool, had taken recourse to coarse communal rhetoric and criticising the Congress party's manifesto. This suggests a two-pronged ploy. To whip up the sentiments of the ardent support base of the party who believe in the Hindutva agenda and to seek higher participation in voting by these sections. And, to discredit the Congress's studied pivot to the agenda of social justice (although it hinged on an idea of recognition made possible by a caste census) and expanded welfare (through neo-Keynesian policies). The Congress lost its base in the Hindi heartland to the parties that favoured "Mandal" politics of intermediate and lower caste-based mobilisation and patronage since the 1990s. The BJP, then, successfully managed to upend these parties by mobilising sections of the OBCs, who felt left out due to the hegemony of select intermediate castes in the Mandal parties, besides using Hindutva to form a solid base of support. Now, the Congress seeks to revive itself in alliance with the Mandal parties who also seek a new resurgence. This has led the BJP and Mr. Modi to take to slandering the grand old party's manifesto, particularly its emphasis on welfare, using familiar communal tropes. It remains to be seen whether the electorate will be emotionally swayed by this rhetoric or logically match it against its expectations of better jobs and livelihoods. This will decide the course of the election as it moves on to the next phases.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 28-4-2024

Lok Sabha polls: Karnataka sees increase in voting as rest of India sees a dip

Chetan Chauhan

In the two phases of polling for the 18th Lok Sabha, Karnataka seems to be an outlier. It has bucked the national trend of lower voter turnout as compared to 2019 Lok Sabha elections, despite Bengaluru pulling down the state's voting percentage substantially.

In the first voting phase for 14 of the 28 Lok Sabha seats in Karnataka, the state election office reported 69.56% voter turnout as compared to 68.96% for the same Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

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Mandya, from where former chief minister H D Kumaraswamy is Janata Dal (Secular)-BJP candidate against Congress candidate Venkatramane Gowda, popularly known as Star Chandru, recorded the highest

voting percentage of 81.67%, according to a voter turnout data released by the Karnataka election office. In 2019, Mandya had recorded 81.48% voting

Four Lok Sabha seats --- Udupi, Hasan, Dakshina Kannada and Tumkar --- recorded voting percentage of more than 77%. Udupi and Tumkur recorded higher voting than in 2019 by about one percentage point whereas in Hasan and Dakshina Kannada it was similar to the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

However, three Bengaluru seats --- Bengaluru North (54.45%), Bengaluru South (53.17%), Bengaluru Central (54.06%) --- recorded the lowest turnout among 14 Lok Sabha seats, continuing with the trend of urban voter apathy. The voting percentages in three Bengaluru Lok Sabha seats are almost similar to 2019.

Two other southern states, Tamil Nadu, which went to polls in the first phase on April 19, and Kerala, where polling took place on April 26, recorded lower than the 2019 voting percentages.

In Tamil Nadu, it was 69.46% as compared to 72.09% in 2019 with women voters outsmarting men fractionally. In Kerala, it was 71.16% as compared to 74.84% in 2019. Andhra and Telangana will vote in subsequent phases.

All Hindi heartland states have witnessed decline in polling in the two phases with Rajasthan, where voting for 25 Lok Sabha seats took place in the first two phases, recording a three percentage point decline as compared to 68.17% in 2019.

Madhya Pradesh, where polling for 12 of the 29 Lok Sabha seats has taken place in two phases, the voting percentage has fallen by about seven percentage points from about 67% in 2019, according to tentative data released by the state election office. In Maharashtra, the voting percentage is down by about three percentage points.

In Uttar Pradesh, where 16 of the 80 Lok Sabha seats have polled, the voting percentage is likely to fall by six percentage points as compared to 2019, an officer in the state election office said, adding the final figures will be available by Monday.

In West Bengal, the voting percentage has fallen for six Lok Sabha seats, where polling has taken place by about four percentage points from 80.4% in 2019, as per data shared by the state election office.

In Bihar, where eight of the 40 Lok Sabha seats have got to polls in two phases, there is about six percentage point dip in voting percentage, as per the state election office. In most of the northeastern states, where voting completed in the first two phases, except Assam, the voting percentage has dipped.

The Election Commission after a fall in voter turnout in first phase had said that it would come up with steps to

improve voter participation in the coming phases. The first two phases, April 19 and April 26, were on Fridays, enabling people an extended weekend. The third phase is on May 7, a Thursday.

Former chief election commissioner, S Y Quraishi, said that the lower voter turnout was disheartening for the Indian democracy. “I can see voter indifference towards the political parties and hot weather conditions in many parts. The Election Commission will have to work hard to improve voter turnout in remaining phases,” he said.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 16-4-2024

Future read: Editorial on CSDS-Lokniti’s pre-poll survey suggesting Modi’s popularity among voters

The survey’s identification of collective ambivalence towards what the Opposition believes are the arrows in its quiver could tilt the scales further in the Bharatiya Janata Party’s favour

The Bharatiya Janata Party’s manifesto for this year’s general election, while making noise on a number of achievements and pledges, is conspicuously silent on one issue — unemployment. Unlike in the past, when the BJP promised to create two crore jobs annually, this year’s manifesto speaks of making India a manufacturing hub. The document’s ambiguity on job creation — the chief economic adviser is on record, suggesting that an elected government cannot resolve the problem of unemployment — could be an outcome of ground realities. The findings of a recent pre-poll survey by CSDS-Lokniti indicated that one of the principal reasons for disenchantment among those opposed to re-electing the Narendra Modi government to power — they are outnumbered by those who want Mr Modi to return for a third term — is the state of the economy. Two out of three respondents critical of Mr Modi’s regime referred to rising unemployment and inflation and falling income under Mr Modi’s watch.

This disaffection, even though it is not numerically significant, should have brought a wind in the sails of the Opposition’s unsteady ship. But it appears that Mr Modi and his party can afford to tide over the choppy waters of the economy on account of their ability to conflate, in a manner of speaking, the Church and the State. The steps to consolidate what the BJP claims is the Hindu identity, from the instrumental use of polarisation to, most crucially, the consecration and building of the Ram temple, have, the survey suggests, insulated the regime from a possible public backlash on account of its poor performance in resolving economic challenges. Perceptions seem to be in Mr Modi’s favour too. For instance, the prime minister’s claim, supported

by a propaganda blitzkrieg, of an improvement in India’s international stature has found many takers. This only reiterates two facts: first, that the BJP is a master of spin and, second, the Opposition is yet to master the art of reading the BJP’s googlies. The survey’s identification of collective ambivalence towards what the Opposition believes are the arrows in its quiver — be it the caste census or the revocation of Article 370 in Kashmir — could tilt the scales further in the BJP’s favour. Surveys, of course, are seldom foolproof. But the fickleness of political fates notwithstanding, the news from the ground borne by such surveys is unlikely to be music to the ears of India’s beleaguered Opposition.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 17-4-2024

INDIA VOTES 2024

AAP reveals all 13 cards in Punjab, but no ‘queen’

Having 47.4% vote share in state, party has failed to field a single woman in Lok Sabha poll

Ruchika M Khanna

Chandigarh, The Aam Aadmi Party today fielded its three sitting MLAs and a political turncoat for the Lok Sabha poll. With today’s announcement, the ruling party has declared its candidates for all 13 Lok Sabha seats.

The party has chosen Pawan Kumar Tinu, a two-time former MLA, who jumped the ship from SAD to AAP on Sunday, as its candidate from Jalandhar. He will be pitted against former Chief Minister and Congress candidate Charanjit Singh Channi and former AAP MP Sushil Kumar Rinku, who switched over to the BJP after his name as the AAP candidate for the Jalandhar Lok Sabha seat was announced, leaving AAP red-faced. Ashok Prashar Pappi, MLA from Ludhiana Central, has been fielded from Ludhiana, Amansher Singh Sherry Kalsi, Batala MLA, from Gurdaspur and Jagdeep Singh Kaka Brar, MLA from Muktsar, has been fielded from Ferozepur. All three candidates bear the stamp of being Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann’s choice. However, the party has not fielded a single woman candidate in the poll. With women having 47.4 per cent vote share and with the highest number of women MLAs (11 were elected from AAP), the party has not maintained a gender balance.

AAP, which swept to power, winning 92 of the 117 seats in 2022, has fielded five of its ministers - Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer (Sangrur), Gurmeet Singh Khuddian (Bathinda) Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal (Amritsar), Dr Balbir Singh (Patiala) and Laljit Singh Bhullar (Khadoor Sahib). It has also earlier given tickets to two

other political turncoats - Dr Raj Kumar Chabbewal (a sitting Congress MLA, who has resigned from the Congress to join AAP last month) and Gurpreet Singh GP (a former Congress MLA, who joined AAP last month).

Only one political greenhorn Karamjit Anmol (Faridkot candidate) has been fielded by the party, while Malvinder Singh Kang has risen from student politics.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 17-4-2024

With DMK-led alliance leading, real battle for 2nd spot in TN

The BJP is pulling out all the stops to step up its narrative and presence in Tamil Nadu.

Kavitha Muralidharan

Senior journalist

WITH Tamil Nadu set to vote on April 19 in the first phase of the Lok Sabha elections, candidates and campaigners of political parties are braving the heat to win over voters. Elections in the state are often likened to a carnival, but this time, they have sparked a curious buzz. Alongside the usual contenders, the BJP is positioning itself as a formidable force. The party's state chief, K Annamalai, who is contesting from the Coimbatore constituency, is hopeful that the party will secure more than 20 per cent of the votes.

Even as opinion polls predict an easy victory for the DMK-led ruling alliance, the real contest appears to be about securing the second place. However, even this perception could be a narrative crafted by the BJP. The AIADMK-led alliance and Tamil nationalist party Naam Thamizhar are also in the fray, making it a four-cornered contest.

The DMK has retained its alliance with the Left, the Congress, Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, MDMK, and several smaller parties, while the AIADMK and the BJP parted ways in September last year. This rupture occurred after Annamalai allegedly made disparaging remarks about DMK founder CN Annadurai and AIADMK's former Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa. When MG Ramachandran (MGR) chose to leave the DMK and establish his own party, he decided to name it after his mentor, Anna. Thus, Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam was born. The name was later changed to the AIADMK — All India (Anaithu Indhiya) Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. Given this legacy, the party could not afford to be indifferent to remarks that disparaged Anna. In response, the AIADMK demanded Annamalai's replacement for the alliance to continue. However, with the BJP high command refusing to yield, the AIADMK ultimately walked out.

Following the split, both AIADMK and BJP made concerted efforts to build strong alliances. The AIADMK has aligned with DMDK (Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam), Puthiya Thamizhagam and SDPI (Social Democratic Party of India). On the other hand, the BJP has formed an alliance with Pattali Makkal Katchi, Tamil Maanila Congress, Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (a splinter group of the AIADMK, formed by TTV Dhinakaran, nephew of VK Sasikala, who was a close associate of Jayalalithaa), and a few other parties. O Panneerselvam, another AIADMK dissident leader, will be contesting as an independent candidate backed by the BJP-led front.

Since the formation of these alliances, both fronts have been aggressively targeting each other, in addition to taking on the DMK-led front. Annamalai has claimed that the AIADMK will cease to exist after June 4 and that the party's cadres will rally around Dhinakaran. In response, AIADMK leaders have issued sharp statements, with former Chief Minister and AIADMK general secretary Edappadi Palaniswami even advising Annamalai to mind his language.

While at the national level, this election is about the BJP's bid to retain power, the focus in Tamil Nadu is on the tussle between the AIADMK and the BJP. "The perception that there is a fight for the second place between the AIADMK and the BJP is primarily due to the splintering within the former," says AS Panneerselvam, the author of *Karunanidhi: A Life*. He explains: "There were two crucial transition points in the DMK. One was in 1969 after Annadurai's death, when there was uncertainty about whether Nedunchezhiyan or Karunanidhi would lead the party. This was resolved within 15 days. The second was after Karunanidhi's death, which again saw a smooth transition. In contrast, the AIADMK has had two painful transition points. One was after MGR's death; it took almost two years to resolve the succession issue. The other was after Jayalalithaa's death, and it's unclear what the consolidation will be like."

In the aftermath of Jayalalithaa's death, Palaniswami, who successfully took control of the party, expelled three prominent leaders — Sasikala, Dhinakaran and Panneerselvam — from the AIADMK. The trio hails from the powerful Thevar community. Under Palaniswami's leadership, there appears to have been a consolidation of support from the Gounder community, to which he belongs.

"There are doubts about Palaniswami's leadership. No one knows how this is going to play out," says Panneerselvam. "If there is a perception of a fight for the second place, it's because of the AIADMK's internal contradictions and infighting. The challenge for the

AIADMK could possibly be how it is going to reinvent itself,” he adds.

Durai Karuna, a senior journalist who has extensively covered AIADMK affairs, acknowledges that the party may undergo consolidation in the event of an electoral setback, but he does not believe that the AIADMK will cease to exist, as Annamalai claims. According to him, the AIADMK’s organisational setup and cadre base — which the BJP cannot match — will stand it in good stead.

The BJP is indeed pulling out all the stops to step up its narrative and presence in Tamil Nadu. For now, the party is aiming to turn perception into reality, converting the buzz about it into votes through a variety of strategies. These include fielding prominent figures in the elections and having Prime Minister Narendra Modi campaign in the state over half a dozen times, besides other national leaders. Whether these strategies will be successful remains to be seen, and the answer will be revealed on June 4.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 18-4-2024

The emerging election mosaic in Uttar Pradesh

Badri Narayan

The full electoral picture in UP, of course, is still to emerge. But the pointers to the future are very much there.

The big picture of Polls 2024 is emerging gradually from a collage of different miniatures. The same is true of the electoral scene in Uttar Pradesh (UP) as well. The picture in the state remains clear in some parts, and hazy in others. Let’s try and see if we can decipher what lies ahead in UP, which elects 80 members to the Lok Sabha.

First, the upcoming parliamentary election is going to be a bipolar contest in most of the seats in the state, and triangular in some. Wherever it is bipolar, it will be a face-off between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Samajwadi Party (SP)-Congress’s INDIA bloc. It will be triangular where the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is alone or in a direct or indirect alliance with small parties such as the Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), Mahan Dal, All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) presents a third front.

Second, the BJP is deploying all its political capital such as the popularity of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, Hindutva mobilisation, the network of government scheme beneficiaries (*labharthi varg*), the governance delivery of the Yogi Adityanath government in the state, micro-social engineering, Ayodhya temple

consecration, and the party’s unrivalled booth management. Thus, it has already taken the lead in attracting large sections of the state’s people. On the other hand, the INDIA bloc has become limited to being an alliance between the Samajwadi Party and the Congress — the BSP, at the very outset, had rejected membership of the bloc, and parties such as the Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), Azad Samaj Party, and Janwadi Party deserted the SP.

The SP has failed to diversify its social base: It lost many of its allies, which were caste-based parties with local or regional presence. The SP could have achieved two things by continuing its alliance with them. First, this would have helped it project a large, rainbow alliance of various caste electorates, with obvious consequences for its eventual voting share in the state. Second, this would have helped the party break a commonly held stereotype about it — that it is a party dominated by a single caste, and therefore, bound to prioritise that caste’s interests. Correcting its image and diversifying its social base has indeed been the key challenge for SP chief Akhilesh Yadav. Its major ally, the Congress, is not in a position to attract an impressive number of voters towards the INDIA bloc in the state.

The BSP, or any third block, could lead to a fragmentation of the anti-BJP votes. It is also true that the BSP may create hurdles for the smooth movement of the Dalit voters in the state towards the BJP. The BSP’s strategy for the 2024 elections is two-pronged. First, it is looking to create an electoral nucleus of Dalits and Muslims. And second, it is looking to attract votes from Other Backward Classes and upper castes by giving tickets to leaders from these groups. To forge a Dalit-Muslim electoral base, the BSP has named prominent Muslim faces such as Munquad Ali, Shamsuddin Rayeen, and Jafar Malik among its star campaigners. Except for Satish Chandra Mishra, who is a Brahmin, most of its campaigners are from the Jatav, Jat, and Bania castes. It has also projected leaders from the Pal community and other Most Backward Classes (MBC). Thus, the BSP has launched another attempt at micro-social engineering.

There are three reasons why the BSP could spoil the INDIA bloc’s chances. First, in some of the seats, its candidates are from the same or similar social groups as those being fielded by the INDIA bloc. Second, the BSP hasn’t fielded mere “vote katwa” candidates (those who are unlikely to get enough votes to win but can pull votes from a serious contender), but influential ones in a number of seats. Third, while the INDIA bloc, given its *pichre*, *Dalit aur alpsankhyak* (PDA) election pitch, views the backward classes, Dalits and minorities as its

possible vote bank, the BSP is emerging as a strong contender for mobilising their votes.

In UP, while the BJP started working on its booth management long ago, the Opposition parties have mounted such efforts only recently. The BJP narrative is already set on the ground, centred on a Hindutva, development, anti-corruption, and anti-dynasty pitch. In contrast, the INDIA bloc has not yet framed its narrative. While the BJP's narrative and the public images of Modi and Adityanath seem to be without any inherent contradictions, the INDIA bloc has much to do to match or surpass the BJP.

Western UP matters a lot in any electoral planning for the state. Modi started his UP campaign from Meerut. Two days later, Amit Shah addressed a rally in Muzaffarnagar. In western UP, the BJP is following its earlier strategy of creating a broader rainbow alliance of various Hindu castes and communities. The emphasis is on consolidating the party's support base among the non-Jat, non-Jatav communities such as Saini, Gurjar, Kashyap, Thakur, Brahmin and Vaishya, and add to this Jat support, which has been strengthened by the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) joining the NDA. In Bundelkhand and eastern UP, the BJP is trying to get support from all Hindu castes. One can easily make out from the tone and tenor of the party's ongoing campaign that there is a concerted attempt to woo the Yadavs and the Jatavs, the core voters of the SP and the BSP, respectively.

The full electoral picture in UP, of course, is still to emerge. But the pointers to the future are very much there.

Badri Narayan is professor, Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad. The views expressed are personal

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 18-4-2024

Jat rumblings to anti-incumbency: Congress hopes Rajasthan halts a run

Hamza Khan

In both 2014 and 2019, the BJP-led NDA made a clean sweep of all the 25 Lok Sabha seats in Rajasthan. As 12 seats go to polls in the first phase on Friday, the Congress hopes to break that trend this time.

The Congress is relying on anger among Jats, anti-incumbency and coalitions, while the BJP is banking on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's hold over voters, **Ram Temple**, abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, and a perception about India's "powerful" image abroad, apart from consolidating its power through inductions of leaders from other parties.

Of the 12 seats, at least three — Churu, Nagaur and Dausa — are likely to see a tough fight. In the remaining nine, the BJP is either comfortably placed, such as in Jaipur City and Bikaner, or has an edge, like in Ganganagar, Jhunjhunu and Bharatpur.

In Churu and Nagaur, Jats have kept both the parties guessing. Both the BJP and Congress have fielded Jats from the two seats.

In Churu, the Congress is hoping to tap into Jat anger over denial of BJP ticket to sitting MP Rahul Kaswan, allegedly at the behest of Rajendra Rathore, a Rajput, while the BJP has thrown its weight behind paralympian Devendra Jhahhariya. Kaswan, who has since left the BJP, is now the Congress candidate. The **poll contest** is being seen as a Kaswan versus Rathore fight. In an attempt to put the spotlight back on its candidate, the BJP coined the slogan, "Dilli mein Narendra, Churu mein Devendra", while Modi spoke about his "old relations" with Jhahhariya at a rally in the area.

The non-inclusion of Jat leaders in the top three posts in the state — chief minister and two deputy chief ministers — is seen as one of the reasons behind the community's anger towards the BJP. The party has been trying to counter this. Nationally, it has allied with the Rashtriya Lok Dal, and has been emphasising that Rajasthan Jat leaders have been appointed to several key posts, including Jagdeep Dhankhar as Vice President and Kailash Choudhary as Union Minister. It has also inducted Jat leaders from the Congress like Jyoti Mirdha last year, and Richpal Mirdha, Vijay Pal Mirdha and Alok Beniwal more recently.

The BJP has fielded Jyoti Mirdha from Nagaur, while the Congress has left the seat for Rashtriya Loktantrik Party (RLP) chief Hanuman Beniwal. This is a reversal of their 2019 roles when Beniwal won the seat as the NDA candidate, defeating Mirdha, who was fielded by the Congress.

Dausa, where State minister Kirodi Lal Meena has been in the news for snapping at some of his rallies and berating the audience, is likely to see another close contest. Congress leader Sachin Pilot has a hold over the region, especially among the youth and Gujjars. The BJP has fielded Kanhaiya Lal Meena against the Congress's Murari Lal Meena.

In Jhunjhunu, the contest seems evenly placed with the Congress banking on Brijendra Ola's "clean" image versus BJP's Shubhakaran Choudhary, who was in the news over his remarks that anyone not voting for the BJP was a deshdrohi (anti-national).

In Jaipur City, the BJP is expected to win by a comfortable majority, so much so that Congress's Pratap Singh Khachariyawas sounded dejected when his name was announced. In Jaipur Rural, which includes

some urban pockets, BJP's Rao Rajendra Singh may not be a strong candidate, but the party's cadre is strong.

Union minister Arjun Ram Meghwal seems comfortably placed in Bikaner, as does Swami Sumedhanand Saraswati (BJP) in Sikar, where the Congress has left the seat for CPI(M) candidate Amra Ram. The Left has been shrinking in the region; in the Assembly elections last year, Amra Ram polled just 20,000 votes from Danta Ramgarh, behind Congress and BJP candidates. While there will be consolidation of Congress and Left votes, their joint share in 2014 was just 29 per cent against Saraswati's 46 per cent; in 2019, the BJP's vote share jumped to 58 per cent, against the 38 per cent polled by Congress and Left.

The Congress is banking on Jat anger in Bharatpur too, but the BJP has made all-out efforts to retain the seat, making it prestige battle as Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma hails from the area. The Jats of Bharatpur and Dholpur have been seeking inclusion in the Central OBC list. Sharma has assured that the state is pursuing the issue, and indicated that there will be positive results. The Congress has fielded Sanjana Jatav, 25, who lost the December Assembly elections by just 409 votes.

In Alwar, the Congress has fielded Lalit Yadav, 34, who is taking on BJP heavyweight Bhupender Yadav. However, the Congress has faced a rebellion over Lalit Yadav's candidature, with several leaders, such as two-time MP Karan Singh Yadav, leaving the party and joining the BJP.

In Karauli-Dholpur, the Congress has fielded Bhajan Lal Jatav, who faces an uphill battle as he is originally from Bharatpur and has been contesting from there. The Congress's Dholpur MLA Shobharani Kushwah has kept her distance from party programmes, adding to the party's woes.

In Ganganagar, the BJP has fielded Priyanka Balan, replacing five-term sitting MP and former union minister Nihal Chand Meghwal, who, unlike Kaswan, hasn't rebelled and is supporting the party candidate. The Congress has fielded AICC secretary Kuldeep Indora, who was defeated in the Assembly elections earlier. Since this is a reserved seat, the Congress has been playing up Balan's background as the daughter-in-law of a non-Scheduled Caste family, and is also banking on the factionalism within the BJP in the area. Meanwhile, political analysts pointed out that even if there is resentment against the BJP among Jats, the Congress may not be able to leverage this. Like its seeming failure to play up the perceived resentment against the Centre over the Agnipath scheme. Other factors will come into play, like the BJP's well-oiled

poll machinery as compared to the Congress's old school campaign.

Moreover, with 13 seats still left for April 26, the inductions have not stopped in the BJP or its allies. Some Congress heavyweights, former MPs and MLAs have already joined the BJP, including Mahendrajeet Malviya, Karan Singh Yadav, Lalchand Kataria, Rajendra Yadav, Khiladi Lal Bairwa, Richpal Mirdha and Vijaypal Mirdha. On Tuesday, both Rajasthan BSP MLAs were also inducted into Eknath Shinde's Shiv Sena.

Also, while the Congress performed well in several Assembly segments last year — in some Lok Sabha seats, it even has majority of the Assembly segments — this may not translate into Lok Sabha votes for the party, as has been seen in the past. The reason being that while voters may want to see a Congress government in Rajasthan, they may still prefer Modi at the Centre. Hence, months after forming a government in the state in 2018, the Congress lost all 25 Lok Sabha seats to the BJP-led NDA in 2019.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 30-4-2024

Ecotani | The silence of the Muslim voter could be real and strategic

Chetan Chauhan

There was silence outside Darul Uloom in Uttar Pradesh's Deoband town, as students walked into India's biggest Muslim seminary dressed in spotless white kurta-pyjamas and wearing a 'taqiyah', the round skull cap, on April 17, two days before polling was to be held for the first phase. A few paused gingerly when stopped for interviews but went ahead inside the tall historic gates of the most important and oldest Islamic seminary in India without revealing their electoral preference.

For decades, the seminary has had a history of issuing advisories to the Muslim community on voting preferences before elections: This time no advisory has yet been issued.

Arshad Madani, principal of the seminary, refused to be interviewed. "We will talk after June 4," was his polite refusal, summing up the mood of the Muslim community in western Uttar Pradesh.

Deoband in UP's Muslim-dominated Saharanpur district is a small town where both Hindus and Muslims have lived for centuries. "Even in the worst of times, there has never been a major communal strife here," said Deepak Singh, working at a chemist outside the Deoband bus station. His neighbour, a Muslim shop-owner agreed, and said his community has decided to keep away from the politics of "hate".

In several areas in western Uttar Pradesh — where the community constitutes about 30% or more of the population, especially in districts such as Saharanpur, Moradabad and Bijnor — Muslims refused to be drawn into a conversation on politics. Except mentioning a common line against political parties, saying nobody has done anything for them.

Some, who only spoke on condition of anonymity, said that they have been pushed into silence. “You don’t know what may happen to us if we are seen on television opposing the local BJP leaders or the ruling party. Police will call my father to the station and humiliate him if I am seen on TV raising my voice against the government,” said a young man in Muzzafarnagar, in his mid-20s, a failed government job aspirant.

The deafening silence

The silence of the Muslim voter is not unique to Lok Sabha elections. During last year’s state elections in BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh and in Congress-ruled Rajasthan, Muslims largely avoided voicing their political views.

In Laxmangarh town in Rajasthan’s Sikar, a Muslim man in his early 50s sitting outside his concrete three-storey house appreciated the work of then Congress legislator Govind Singh Dotasara, but did not say a word against the BJP. “Everything is fine,” he replied when asked what he thinks about the BJP, which snatched the state from the Congress in Rajasthan. Dotasara won from Laxmangarh.

Similarly, in Muslim-dominated old Bhopal, Muslims spoke in hushed tones about their vote for the Congress and their preference for local MLA, Arif Masood, but did not speak against the BJP. “Let’s talk about food in old Bhopal,” said Ameen Ali, who runs a small shop, trying to avoid a question on BJP’s 15 years in Madhya Pradesh. The BJP won the state assembly polls winning 163 of 230 state assembly seats.

This reporter found that the Muslim community, once open about their political views, are now reluctant to speak about politics and their personal rights. Even on critical issues such as the Uniform Civil Code, which many Muslim scholars believe, is targeted against the community, the community has not really been vocal.

When the Uttarakhand assembly passed the UCC law in February 2024 in the state assembly, Muslims did not protest. “We did not want a repeat of what happened when Muslims protested against the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019. Cases were registered against a large number of our community members. This time, we held meetings in mosques and told people not to protest. We will fight UCC legally,” said Mohammed Yusuf, a lawyer at Uttarakhand’s Haldwani lower court,

and a member of Jamiat-Ulema-Hind, a national organisation of Muslims.

Prominent Muslim community leaders such as Yusuf said a decision has been taken not to protest but to vote silently, saying that they have learnt from their experiences in Uttar Pradesh, where Muslim leaders were jailed for organising protests. This message has been delivered to the community through mosques and community leaders.

“The attempt is not to help the BJP to polarise the polls,” said a prominent Muslim leader of western UP. A community leader in western UP aware of the discussions and developments within the community said families have been advised to vote in batches so that long queues of Muslims are not visible at polling stations; People have been told to avoid wearing dresses which can identify them as Muslims at polling booths.

The idea is not to give an impression that Muslims are voting in large numbers, the leader said, as it could polarise voting. Overall, however, while voting in the first two phases in Uttar Pradesh has fallen compared to 2019, data from the UP election office is not available to analyse voting trends in Muslim-dominated areas.

It appears that the silence of Muslim voters is real and strategic aimed at targeting the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. Most leaders this reporter spoke to said the Muslims would vote for the party which would be in a position to defeat BJP, ignoring even community leaders contesting the polls.

Chetan Chauhan, national affairs editor, analyses the most important environment and political story in the country this week

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 28-4-2024

Lok Sabha elections: With Salim by his side, Adhir claims BJP gaining in Bengal, blames Mamata

Express News Service

Campaigning for CPI(M) state secretary Mohd Salim in Domkal under Murshidabad Lok Sabha constituency, state Congress chief Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury hit out at Trinamool Congress (TMC), accusing the party of weakening the Opposition INDIA bloc in West Bengal. While the Congress and Left Front are fighting the elections together, the TMC is contesting in all the 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal after coming out of the INDIA bloc. “There is a saying that morning shows the day. Today’s gathering here gives an indication that Salim bhai is going to Parliament this time. In the three Lok Sabha constituencies in Murshidabad district (Murshidabad, Baharampur, and Jangipur), you have to defeat the Trinamool Congress,” said Chowdhury.

Claiming that the BJP was gaining in West Bengal, the Congress leader blamed the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and TMC supremo. "Everywhere in the country, the BJP is losing. But in West Bengal, the BJP is gaining. This is because of Mamata Banerjee and her policies. She is helping the BJP by coming out of the INDIA bloc. She is helping the BJP grow in Bengal by targeting the Congress and the Left Front. She is doing this to protect her nephew Abhishek Banerjee from central agency investigations. She has no other choice than to help the BJP," Chowdhury claimed, referring to CBI and ED questioning TMC MP Abhishek in corruption cases.

Urging the people to vote for Salim, Adhir, who is contesting from neighbouring Barhampur constituency, said: "Salim da is an able Parliamentarian. He used to give a lot of trouble to the BJP by asking pertinent questions when he was an MP. His experience as a Parliamentarian is needed to counter the policies of the BJP. You have to elect him to the Lok Sabha again so that he continues to fight against the BJP."

The senior CPI(M) leader had last won the Lok Sabha elections in 2014 from Raiganj in Uttar Dinajpur district. He lost to BJP's Debashree Roy Chowdhury from there in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 30-4-2024

1st Phase UZ Polls

EC appoints 141 judicial magistrates

Staff Correspondent

The Election Commission (EC) has appointed 141 judicial magistrates for the first phase of the upcoming sixth upazila parishad polls.

EC in a notification on Monday said, "141 judicial magistrates have been appointed as first class magistrates for five days from May 6 to May 10 in the upazila parishad polls of 59 districts to conducting the election duty." The respective District Commissioners will provide the necessary vehicles while performing their duties in their respective areas. Besides, two armed policemen will assist them to run the courts in the respective area.

According to the EC schedule first phase polling will be held in 150 upazilas on May 8.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 16-4-2024

BNP will not participate in upazila polls

Nominations submission for first phase ends

Walid Khan

BNP will not participate in the first phase of upazila election.

BNP will take the decision at the next Standing Committee meeting whether or not it will participate in

next three phases of upazila polls, BNP Standing Committee Member Nazrul Islam Khan told the Daily Observer.

A section of the party leaders is in favour of participating in the upazila elections but another section is against participating in the polls. The time for submission of nomination papers in the first phase of Upazila Parishad election ended on April 15.

The BNP leaders are not participating in the upazila elections as a party because no decision came from the partys policy-makers.

Many of the BNP grassroots leaders who are interested in participating in the upazila elections said that they are afraid of being expelled.

Expelled leaders and those who resigned are active in election campaigns.

The party took no decision regarding the upazila election as the partys policy-making council standing committee did not meet before Eid-ul-Fitr. Nazrul Islam told the Daily Observer, "We have not taken any decision regarding the upazila elections. Our earlier decision not to participate in the elections under the present government stands."

He said if there is any new decision of the party regarding the upazila election, we will let the people know through the media.

A BNP leader said that ruling Awami League is sharply divided about the upazila polls.

He said that the division in the ruling party has generated political fights between grassroots leaders, incumbent ministers, MPs, defeated MP candidates and ALs independent candidates who won in the recent election.

"The grassroots leaders are desperately trying to win the election, while AL leaders, ministers and MPs are trying control of upazila parishads," he said.

Another section in BNP thinks that in elections a party tests its strength. That's why a political party must participate in elections.

Upazila election will begin on May 8.

April 15 was the last day of submission of nomination papers for election in 152 upazila parishads in the first phase.

Elections will be held in four phases in 481 upazilas.

BNP participated in the Upazila Parishad elections after boycotting the January 5, 2014 general election. Even after the 2018 general election, BNP participated in local government elections. Later, BNP decided to boycott the upazila, municipal and union council elections.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 18-4-2024
Flurry of activity ahead of elections

Lakdev Liyanagama

The Sinhala and Tamil New Year may have diminished the pace of political activity in the country as political leaders took a breather for the festivities (with many taking wing abroad) but that has not dampened the enthusiasm of the major political parties that remain very much focused on the elections due this year.

Many of these parties have issues and challenges that are unique to themselves. Arguably the worst hit at this time is the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) where the dispute between the factions headed by two former Presidents, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and Maithripala Sirisena is at its peak.

The current situation is that Kumaratunga has obtained an enjoining order restraining Sirisena from functioning as Chairman of the SLFP. This is due to be heard further in Court today (Thursday). In the interim, the Politburo of the SLFP met and appointed Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva as Acting Chairman.

The two factions are also locked in a battle to gain access to the party's headquarters in Darley Road, Colombo. This tussle is eerily reminiscent of the battle between former Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Maithripala Senanayake for the SLFP leadership and control of its party headquarters four decades ago.

Whatever the outcome of the Court proceedings and whichever faction emerges ahead, there is no denying that the credibility of the SLFP and its popularity has taken a severe beating. As a result, it is no longer in a position to be a force to reckon with at major national elections due later in the year.

There is a slight possibility for the party to have a reversal of its misfortune if the Court holds in Kumaratunga's favour which could result in a change of leadership of the SLFP. However, the absence of a single personality as a clear choice to succeed Sirisena reduces this prospect drastically.

Minister de Silva has been appointed as an 'Interim' Chairman but does not possess the charismatic leadership qualities or the youthful dynamism that are required to resurrect the SLFP, most party stalwarts feel. They also believe reconciliation between the warring factions is unlikely at this stage.

The role of the SLFP's former General Secretary Dayasiri Jayasekara in this dispute has been quite interesting. Jayasekara was recently locked in a dispute with Sirisena who sacked him from his position as General Secretary. Therefore, it was expected he would join those opposed to Sirisena.

Instead, Jayasekara has chosen to do the opposite. He has spoken out against the action taken by Kumaratunga and her allies calling it a 'conspiracy' to destroy the SLFP. This has been interpreted as an attempt to win Sirisena's confidence and cement his position as No.2 under Sirisena's leadership.

This is a decisive call that Jayasekara is making. Once known as a leading stalwart in the United National Party (UNP), Jayasekara left that party to seek better avenues to progress his career. He has now identified himself with the Sirisena faction in a step that could make or break his political future.

While the SLFP is trying to put its house in order, its erstwhile rival, the UNP has also been engaging in some soul searching of its own in preparation for elections. President Ranil Wickremesinghe has constantly reviewed the state of the party's grassroots network after its resounding defeat in 2020.

As the leader of the country, President Wickremesinghe has had to focus his time and energy to resurrecting the country's economy. He has delegated the task of rejuvenating the UNP to the second-tier leadership of the party. While this is underway, it still has not elevated the UNP to its glory days.

Some UNP stalwarts argue that this is a difficult task as the party's representation in Parliament has been reduced to a solitary National List seat. However, it must be noted that the Jathika Jana Balavegaya (JJB) or the National People's Power (NPP), with just three MPs in Parliament has made great strides in setting up and expanding its party network.

However, it is now certain that if President Wickremesinghe puts himself forward as a candidate for the Presidential Election (PE) that must be held by October, he will not run from the UNP per se. Instead, he will project himself as a 'common' candidate and contest under a symbol different from the UNP's 'Elephant.'

Despite the 'Elephant's historical value as a symbol readily recognised by the Sri Lankan voter, it has been suggested that the President will be at an advantage if he contests with a 'neutral' symbol. This enables the President to project himself as a statesman, devoid of petty and parochial party politics.

There is no shortage of parties and symbols for the President to choose from. The frontrunner at this time is the 'Swan' which has been used a couple of times before in PEs. The rights to this symbol are now with former Minister Ravi Karunanayake. This is the symbol which propelled Maithripala Sirisena to the Presidency in 2015.

Also available to the President are parties that are under the direction of Minister of Tiran Alles. They possess

the symbols of the cellular phone and the trophy. It was the latter that was used at the 2010 General Elections (GE) by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka and Arjuna Ranatunga.

It is clear that the UNP and President Wickremesinghe in particular are pursuing an ‘open door’ policy of welcoming all politicians to join the President for the next PE and GE. In fact, the General Secretary of the UNP Palitha Range Bandara even made references to specific politicians in this regard recently.

“What we are thinking of is a joint effort which goes beyond party politics. So, we invite all political parties to join hands to achieve the common goal of making Sri Lanka a stable nation,” Bandara told the media on Tuesday when asked whether his party would welcome any SLFP members who are in crisis.

Bandara also invited several MPs from the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) to join his leader. “We call on Dr. Harsha de Silva, Eran Wickramaratne, Kabir Hashim and Thalatha Athukorala to join us,” Bandara said. He claimed that these Parliamentarians were being “sidelined” by SJB and Opposition leader Sajith Premadasa.

The UNP will find the task of wooing disgruntled or disappointed SJB MPs far easier than enlisting the support of the party President Wickremesinghe governs with, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). There are two equally strong schools of thought in that party about this crucial issue.

One is that President Wickremesinghe should be given another term of office to complete the task of rescuing the economy which he has begun. This is best articulated by Minister Prasanna Ranatunga. Another faction in the party resists this idea, suggesting that the SLPP should field its own candidate.

The statements of various party stalwarts- including Ranatunga and new National Organiser Namal Rajapaksa – did not help the SLPP project an image of unity in the party. As a result, the party has now asked its members to refrain from making statements about PE candidates until the party makes a formal decision in due course.

Against this backdrop, there is yet another group carrying out discussions of its own to try and put forward a candidate for the PE. They include the group led by Wimal Weerawansa and Udaya Gammanpila as well as some from the Nidahasa Jathika Sabhawa (NJS). This dialogue is ongoing.

There are a diverse range of politicians involved in this process. Whether they will be able to find common ground and agree on a candidate agreeable to all the parties in the dialogue remains to be seen. Whether such

a candidate can then command a following among the public is also an issue.

The other party in the PE race, the NPP does not have to deal with such matters. It has steadily built up its support network and expanded its vote base. Its leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD) is its confirmed candidate. There are no disputes about that. However, even the NPP is now scrutinising its campaign.

This is after concerns were raised as to whether the NPP can sustain the early momentum it generated. This peaked early last year in the aftermath of the turmoil that led to the resignation of former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the postponement of Local Government (LG) polls. Now though, its support may be falling. Sri Lankans have short memories and most parties cannot sustain a momentum gained from a couple of events.

All this hectic political activity points in only one direction, towards the PE later this year. Next week will see a flurry of political events and pronouncements as parties vie against each other to recapture the attention of voters. It all points to a very interesting few months ahead.

This column also notes with sadness the passing away of Sarvodaya founder Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, who, although not a career politician, was influential in political circles with his analytical comments on the local political scene. He was also an unofficial ambassador for Sri Lanka, having close relationships with many world leaders.

The week also marked the sudden death of former MP Palitha Thevarapperuma, a maverick politician who was popular among the electorate for always siding with the common people, sometimes even going against party dictates. He was also an animal lover, who fed stray animals during the Covid lockdown period at his own expense. As a junior minister for wildlife conservation, he even had a couple of heated arguments with his Minister Field Marshal Fonseka, which no one else would have dared to do. However, he kept a low profile after retiring from active politics, occasionally popping up to give a voice cut or two.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 24-4-2024

President will contest Prez poll under common symbol

Many SLFPers, other leaders will join

UNP on May Day :

Asela Kuruluwansa

UNP General Secretary Palitha Range Bandara said President Ranil Wickremesinghe will contest the Presidential Election as a common candidate under a new common symbol.

He said that leaders of several parties, including the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, have commenced negotiations to join the UNP and some of them will be on the UNP stage during the party's May Day rally. Commenting on the party's preparations for the upcoming May Day he said that the UNP will hold one of the biggest May Day rallies in history.

Bandara was speaking at a meeting held in Pathahewahata, Kandy. He also said that the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, formed by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and a faction which broke away from the United National Party is currently facing serious crises and added the best course of action for them at the moment is to join the UNP. He also stressed that the Presidential Election will be held first.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 16-4-2024

Oli dismisses left unity, stresses national unity

Post Report

Even though Nepal's three major communist parties—the CPN-UML, Maoist Centre and Unified Socialist—have come together to form the government, KP Oli, the chairman of the largest of them, the UML, has rejected the idea of a communist unity.

The unity among the leftist parties is not the necessity of the present, Oli said while addressing the UML's parliamentary party on Monday. He, however, said that “there is a need for cooperation among the forces that are in favour of good governance and national unity.”

After Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal ditched the alliance with the Nepali Congress and brought the UML and the Unified Socialist on board the government, there were speculations in Kathmandu's political circles on whether the parties were aiming for a left unity like the one in June 2018.

Back then, Oli and Dahal had decided to merge the two communist parties they led following the 2017 parliamentary elections and formed the Nepal Communist Party, which was later dissolved in March 2021 following the Supreme Court's verdict.

“Neither can the left unity form a new government nor govern the country. Left parties cannot form and run the government, and in the guise of left unity, many fake things are happening. And some of us are even discussing such fake things,” he said.

Oli also mentioned the historical context of how the NCP was formed and how it was dissolved.

“We know and understand that it was our responsibility to bring communist parties together and unite leftist, progressive, and patriotic movements,” Oli said. “But

that unity among the left parties was weakened. We, however, are not responsible for that.”

Oli added that the time is ripe for national forces to come together for the protection of national unity, promotion of good governance, and prosperity. “Unity among such national forces is essential now,” he said. “Not the unity among communist parties.”

After the NCP was dissolved in March 2021, the largest-ever communist party split into three factions—UML, Maoist Centre and the CPN (Unified Socialist), which was formed by a group of leaders who splintered from the UML. After the NCP split, both the Maoist Centre and the Unified Socialist supported the Nepal Congress chief Sher Bahadur Deuba for the next prime minister.

“We cannot build a party by bringing together those communists who voted for Deuba,” Oli said on Monday.

“Today, there is no such thing as unity in the name of the left-wing parties. We should not have the illusion that the party will be strengthened by uniting with those who voted for the Nepali Congress. We cannot unite the party with those who are looking for opportunities to harm the party.”

The UML chairman also responded to questions such as why the UML did not claim important ministries like home, finance, and others. “The objective of the current political equation is not about frequent changes in government or seeking monetary gains from finance and other ministries,” he said. “We are here to build the country.”

Oli went on, “We are not here to claim this or that ministry. We don't want to bear the tension and bitterness. That is not our job. Our foremost duty was to knock down the former alliance which was not in favour of the country.”

Oli also said that he is currently not interested in becoming prime minister.

“We only wanted to change the ruling equation,” he said. “The post of prime minister is important because it leads the nation. But at present, it is not my priority.”

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 28-4-2024

Government retains disputed provisions in new media council bill

The communications ministry on Thursday registered the bill, which envisions a committee led by its secretary to select the chairperson and members of the council.

BINOD GHIMIRE

KATHMANDU, The government has registered a Media Council Bill in the National Assembly, retaining

some controversial provisions from the previous bill that the media fraternity decried.

The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology on Thursday registered the bill, which envisions a committee led by its secretary to select the chairperson and members of the council. The council is authorised to advise the government in formulating media policies and the media code of conduct. A similar provision in the bill registered by the KP Sharma Oli government in 2019 had met with criticisms. Though it was endorsed by the National Assembly, it couldn't become law as the term of the lower house came to an end before the bill was endorsed.

Five years later, the new bill envisions replacing the existing Press Council with a new entity called Media Council. The council, led by a chairperson who qualifies to become a Supreme Court justice, will have 11 members in total, as per the bill.

Any Nepali citizen who holds a bachelor's degree of law and has worked as Chief Judge or Judge of the High Court for seven years or has practised law for at least fifteen years as a law graduate senior advocate or advocate or has worked for at least fifteen years in the judicial or legal field or has worked as a gazetted officer first class or above of the judicial service for at least twelve years is eligible for appointment as a Judge of the Supreme Court.

It says a three-member panel chaired by the secretary of the ministry has an expert and a government joint-secretary as members. Media analysts and journalist associations have objected to the provision.

"How can a secretary-led committee select the chairperson who has the same status as a Supreme Court justice? This provision is objectionable," Suresh Acharya, former president of the Federation of Nepali Journalists, the umbrella organisation of Nepali journalists, told the Post.

A few months ago, a panel led by Acharya that had the sitting president of the federation among members, submitted a report to the ministry suggesting an independent panel for the selection of the chairperson and members but its recommendations were not adhered to while finalising the bill.

"We will object to any provision that is not in line with our report," Bipul Pokharel, president of the federation, told the Post. "We will soon come up with our official position on the bill."

The new bill also makes it mandatory for the owner of the media houses to disclose his/her sources of income and investments besides those in the media houses.

Every news related to the business operated by the media owner must have a disclaimer, as per the bill. The

new bill, however, has removed several controversial provisions from the previous one.

The bill registered by the Oli government had proposed confiscation of media equipment and slapping fines up to Rs1 million and 15 years in jail for media persons found publishing offensive content or the content that undermined Nepal's sovereignty, territorial integrity and nationality. It also provisioned mandatory licensing for all working journalists and licensing examinations for aspiring new journalists from the council.

The provisions, however, were removed by the National Assembly following widespread criticism from various quarters.

As per the new bill, if one deems the media content defamatory, they can file cases in district courts. The council will work to hold the media accountable through self-regulation, which is in line with the federation's suggestions.

The bill will be presented in the upper house after the budget session commences. It will then be sent to a parliamentary committee for detailed discussions before it is presented for a vote. To become a law, it needs to be endorsed by both houses of the federal parliament.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 27-4-2024

Interior Minister confirms Iran's readiness for second round of parliamentary elections

TEHRAN- Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi has declared the readiness to proceed with the second phase of parliamentary elections.

Vahidi disclosed on Thursday that all necessary arrangements have been completed for the upcoming electoral process. He highlighted the extensive preparations undertaken across all 22 constituencies for the second round of the 12th parliamentary elections.

Notably, Vahidi emphasized that eight constituencies will conduct the election entirely through electronic means.

The scheduled date for this phase of the parliamentary election is set for May 10.

Earlier on March 1, the country held parliamentary Assembly of Experts elections. The polls opened across Iran at 8 a.m. local time (0430) on Friday for parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections.

More than 61 million people were eligible to vote.

About 15,000 parliamentary candidates were vying for 290 seats for a four-year term.

Simultaneously, people voted for 88 members of the Assembly of Experts, a body in charge of overseeing the

performance of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution. Candidates for the assembly are elected for an eight-year term.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Leader of the Islamic Revolution, cast his ballot at a polling station in Tehran in the first minutes of voting.

Ayatollah Khamenei called on the voters to turn in big numbers to please friends and disappoint enemies.

“We ask the Almighty God to make today a happy day for the Iranian nation and that the results of the efforts of our dear people and those involved in the various issues of the elections may reach the desired results and benefit the Iranian nation,” the Leader said after voting. “Our dear nation should know that today the eyes of many people in the world, both individuals and politicians and those who hold prestigious national and political positions, are on Iran and you.”

“They want to see what you are doing in this election and what will be the result of your election. Both our friends and people who are interested in the Iranian nation, as well as ill-wishers from all sides, observe the issues of our country and our beloved nation. Pay attention to this; make friends happy and disappoint the ill-wishers.”

The Leader repeated his recommendation to the voters in the previous elections to head to the polls and vote as early as possible.

“The second recommendation is to vote for as many people as you need, not fewer, in any constituency. For example, in Tehran, vote for 30 people in the Islamic Consultative Assembly and for 16 people in the Assembly of Experts of the Leadership,” he added.

Later in March 5, Mohsen Eslami, the spokesperson for the election headquarters, provided details on the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections.

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

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

However, all 88 seats for the Assembly of Experts were filled in March 1 elections.

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

THE KABUL TIMES, KABUL 23-4-2024 **Recognition; Excuse and Vengeance**

By Hashmat Naseri

With the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate, some countries and International organizations consistently endeavor to portray the ruling government in Afghanistan as ineffective and irresponsible through the dissemination of false reports and the perpetuation of consecutive sessions. They persistently highlight issues such as the so-called human rights violations, the establishment of an inclusive government, and the escalating levels of poverty and unemployment in Afghanistan. In addition to concealing facts and distorting achievements, they strive to present an inaccurate and unrealistic image of the current regime, tarnishing the credibility of the Islamic Emirate in the International Community and portraying the governance in the country as flawed. Officials from the International organizations, especially UNAMA, consistently praise the achievements and on-going functions of the Islamic Emirate in various arenas during physical meetings. However, by disseminating biased reports and presenting a distorted image of the country, they aim to isolate Afghanistan at the global platforms. It must be acknowledged that under the current regime in the country, administrative corruption, a false economy, imposition of economic and political sanctions by the International community against the ruling regime, insecurity, poverty, unemployment, cultivation, production, trafficking, and drug use, cessation of aid from countries and funding organizations to Afghanistan, and etc. were among the major obstacles inherited by the Islamic Emirate. Initially, most believed that the ruling system would face serious problems without the support of the International Community, and efforts were made to exacerbate public distrust towards the current government. The majority still believes that with the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate, the level of poverty, insecurity, unemployment, administrative corruption, and various political, economic, social, and cultural problems in Afghanistan have increased. However, they remain unaware that these problems stem from the wrong and inappropriate decisions and policies of the continued invasions, as well as of the past governments, their supporters, and intense political problems during the past four decades. Over the past twenty years, numerous countries and donors, despite having all the financial, technical, and political support and spending billions of dollars in Afghanistan, have failed to establish a unified, inclusive, and independent government, eradicate administrative corruption, poverty, and unemployment, prohibit cultivation,

production, and trafficking of drugs, and ensure human rights in Afghanistan. Instead, during this period, substantial amounts of aid to Afghanistan were diverted towards funding military and economic apparatus and paying exorbitant salaries and bonuses to International advisors and foreign high-ranking officials. In short, the countries and donors have taken back a significant portion of the funds they provided to Afghanistan under various terms. It must be acknowledged that over the past four decades, the United States and its allies have never worked towards a self-sufficient, independent, and stable Afghanistan. Instead, they have spent huge amounts through funding similar, imaginary, and unnecessary projects in Afghanistan, the results of which are evident upon their withdrawal from the country. We all know that before the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate, the so-called inclusive government was formed in Afghanistan, and important positions in the system were handed over to individuals affiliated with political parties and movements. However, this led to serious governance problems, unprecedented increases in administrative and moral corruption, slow delivery of services to the people, and heightened political opposition among government officials. As a result, the system collapsed, leaving detrimental effects on the social and economic lives of the people. Despite facing political and economic sanctions and increasing pressure, some countries, organizations, and individuals are trying to blame the Islamic Emirate and expect the ruling regime to tackle the existing problems and eradicate them completely utilizing the limited resources. Considering the accomplishments of the Islamic Emirate over the past three years, unprecedented progress achieved during this time in comparison to the past twenty years, it is undeniable and nobody can refute it. The issuance of a general amnesty decree by the supreme leader of the Islamic Emirate has fostered unity, brotherhood, and equality among various ethnic groups in the country. Furthermore, ensuring overall security in Afghanistan is a significant blessing that sets the stage for the implementation of any type of economic and developmental plans and policies in the country. On the other hand, another distinctive feature of the Islamic Emirate is its unified governance, where all officials strive under a single leadership to sincerely pursue the vision and policies of the supreme leader of the Islamic Emirate and achieve self-sufficiency for Afghanistan. Moreover, tackling corruption, ensuring transparency in all governance sectors, initiating economic and developmental projects, paving the way for attracting domestic and foreign investments, eradicating cultivation, production, trafficking, and use of drugs, strengthening governance, delivering services

to the people, aiding the needy, expanding levels of trade, economic, and political interactions with neighboring and regional countries, etc., are tangible achievements that have also amazed the International community and people of the world. However, countries and International organizations merely use issues such as the so-called human rights violations, establishment of an inclusive government, and increasing poverty as pretexts to discredit the Islamic Emirate and consistently attempt to divert global attention, conceal facts, and overshadow the remarkable progress made in the past three years. On the other hand, the United States and its allies never imagined leaving Afghanistan in such simplicity. America's failure in Afghanistan has indeed tarnished its prestige and credibility among the International community. America and its supporters make necessary efforts to hinder the recognition of Afghanistan. By doing so, they aim to remove themselves from the circle of blame and, through revenge against the current regime, somehow compensate for their own failures. In the same vein, America and some destructive organizations, using certain individuals and groups inside and outside the country, are bent on tarnishing the ruling system by raising the mentioned issues, determined to present an unrealistic image of Afghanistan to the world. The welfare of the people and the economic self-sufficiency of Afghanistan have been the policies of the Islamic Emirate, and the leaders and government entities have spared no effort in striving day and night to achieve them. Despite facing political and economic sanctions from the International community, the Islamic Emirate has achieved such tangible accomplishments with minimal resources. Let's consider: if political and economic sanctions are lifted, the ruling government is recognized, and political and economic interactions with the world expand, where will Afghanistan be in the next five or ten years under the current regime? The people of Afghanistan and neighboring countries and the region have come to realize that the ruling system is indispensable for the progress and prosperity of Afghanistan and the stability and advancement of the region. They still applaud the efforts made by the Islamic Emirate in various fields over the past three years. Therefore, in conclusion, it is obvious that America has never had goodwill intentions for Afghanistan and is striving to keep Afghanistan under its control, always a needy country adapting to their evil and undesirable plans. Unfortunately, instead of contributing to the welfare, progress, and prosperity of the country, some individuals and groups, in pursuit of pleasing America and its allies, are focused on seeking revenge, securing personal interests, undermining the

system, propagating negative thoughts, and finding any means to discredit the ruling regime in the country.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 23-4-2024

PML-N bags dozen seats out of 21 up for grabs in by-elections

Iftikhar A. Khan

ISLAMABAD: The ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) grabbed the highest number of seats in the by-polls held in 21 National and provincial assembly constituencies on April 21.

According to Forms-47 released by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), the party clinched two of the five National Assembly seats, nine out of 12 Punjab Assembly seats, and one out of the two Balochistan Assembly seats up for grabs.

The PPP and PTI-backed Sunni Ittehad Council, and an independent candidate won a National Assembly seat each. The PPP, PML-Q, and Istehkam-i-Pakistan Party (IPP) got one seat each in the Punjab Assembly.

In a major upset, an independent candidate Mubarak Zeb — brother of slain independent candidate Rehan Zeb, who was killed before the February 8 general elections — won from the NA-8 Bajaur constituency defeating Gul Zafar Khan.

PPP, PTI clinch one National Assembly seat each

Faisal Amin Khan won the National Assembly seat from NA-44 in Dera Ismail Khan vacated by his brother Ali Amin Gandapur. He bagged 66,860 votes while his rival Rasheed Khan Kundi of the PPP got 21,970.

In NA-119 (Lahore), Ali Pervaiz of the PML-N won by securing 51,086 votes. Runner-up Shahzad Farooq backed by the PTI got 34,197 votes. The seat was vacated by Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz.

The NA-132 (Kasur) seat vacated by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif was won by Rasheed Ahmed Khan of the PML-N to become the only person in the by-polls to secure more than 100,000 votes. He got 146,849 votes while PTI-backed Sardar Hussain Dogar got 34,197 votes

In Sindh's Qamber Shahdadkot, PPP's Khursheed Junejo won the NA-196 constituency, vacated by party Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, with 91,581 votes. The only other candidate in the race was Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan's Muhammad Ali, who got 2,763 votes.

Punjab Assembly

In Chakwal-cum-Talagang's PP-22, PML-N's Falak Sher Awan defeated SIC's Nisar Ahmad. They secured 58,845 and 49,979 votes, respectively.

In Gujrat's PP-32, former Punjab CM Chaudhry Parvez Elahi was defeated by his nephew, PML-Q's Musa Elahi, who clinched 71,357 votes. The former CM could only bag 37,106 votes.

PML-N's Adnan Afzal Chattha won the PP-36 Wazirabad seat defeating PTI's Faiz Chattha. They secured 74,769 and 58,682 votes, respectively.

The PP-54 Narowal seat was won by federal minister Ahsan Iqbal's son Ahmed Iqbal who defeated SIC's Awais Qasim. The winner received 59,234 votes while his opponent could get 45,762 votes.

In Bhakkar's PP-93, PML-N's Saeed Akbar Khan defeated an independent candidate Afzal Dhandla in a close contest. They secured 62,058 and 58,845 votes, respectively. In PP-139 Sheikhupura, PML-N's Rana Afzaal Hussain won by bagging 45,585 votes. SIC's Mian Ijaz Hussain bagged only 29,833 votes.

In PP-147 Lahore, Muhammad Riaz of the PML-N won by just getting 31,841 votes. He defeated an independent candidate Muhammad Khan Madani who got 16,548 votes in an electoral race marked by low turn-out (13.97 per cent).

The Form-47 shows that SIC's candidate Shahrukh Jamal Butt pulled out of the race after the passage of the deadline for the withdrawal of his nomination papers. In PP-149 Lahore, Muhammad Shoaib Siddiqui of the Istehkam-i-Pakistan Party emerged victorious by securing 47,722 votes. He beat SIC's Zeeshan Rasheed who managed to get 26,209 votes.

PML-N's Chaudhry Muhammad Nawaz won from Lahore's PP-158, defeating SIC's Chaudhry Moonis Elahi. They got 40,165 and 28,018 votes, respectively. On the PP-164 seat from Lahore, PML-N's Rashid Minhas defeated SIC's Mohammad Yousuf.

In Rahim Yar Khan's PP-266, PPP's Mumtaz Ali defeated PML-N's Muhammad Safdar Khan Leghari by a clear margin. They secured 47,181 and 34,552 votes, respectively. SIC's Ch Samiullah was far behind in the race with 14,627 votes.

In PP-290 Dera Ghazi Khan, PML-N's Ali Ahmad Khan Leghari won against independent candidate Sardar Muhammad Mohiuddin. They respectively secured 62,484 and 23,670 votes.

KP Assembly

Mubarak Zeb Khan, who won the National Assembly seat from Bajaur also emerged victorious on PK-22, Bajaur, securing 23,386 votes. He defeated Abid Khan of the Jamaat-i-Islami who got 10,477 votes. PTI's Daud Shah won PK-91, Kohat with 23,496 votes, while independent candidate Imtiaz Shahid got 16,518 votes.

Similarly, PML-N's Muhammad Zareen Khan Magsi won the provincial assembly seat PB-22 from Lasbela, receiving 49,777 votes, whereas independent Shah Nawaz Hasan secured 3,869 votes.

Balochistan National Party-Mengal candidate Mir Jahanzeb Mengal won the provincial assembly seat from the PB-20 constituency of Khuzdar, receiving 28,175 votes, while independent candidate Shafiq Mengal got 20,344 votes.

Moreover, a re-election was held in PB-50, Killa Abdullah, from where Zamarak Khan of the Awami National Party won with 72,032 votes, while Mir Wais Khan Achakzai of Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party came second with 57,132 votes. The turn-out in this constituency remained highest (79.65 pc).

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 26-4-2024

Commentary: Washington's credibility as a judge on human rights deeply questionable

BEIJING, (Xinhua) -- Once again, Washington has resorted to peddling baseless accusations of "genocide" and "forced labor" in Xinjiang to smear China.

Despite its own chilling human rights records, the United States in the recent "2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices" used concocted research reports and testimonies which are replete with inaccuracies and logical inconsistencies to vilify China.

This is nothing new. For years, the tactics employed by anti-China entities and individuals to propagate falsehoods related to Xinjiang have been repeatedly exposed, from manipulating data to disseminating fabricated information from separatist groups, and distorting Chinese media reports.

However, Washington's China-bashers have not yet tired of exploiting misinformation and propaganda to further their own Sinophobic narrative.

The report and previous U.S. allegations on Xinjiang, which are riddled with fabrications and ideological bias, are nothing short of a political charade.

By pushing for punitive measures against Chinese companies and meddling in China's internal affairs, some in Washington have revealed their true intention of sabotaging China's progress.

If one visits Xinjiang, one will see Washington's lies immediately debunked. Diplomats from various countries who have visited Xinjiang have attested to the peaceful and prosperous lives of people in Xinjiang.

Ironically, despite invitations extended by China to U.S. lawmakers and officials to witness the reality in Xinjiang, their conspicuous absence underscores their insincerity and ulterior motives.

In October 2022, the United States' attempt to push through a Xinjiang-related draft decision at the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council met with resounding opposition from the majority of member states, exposing the futility of its crusade against China.

The United States' obsession with spreading lies and rumors about Xinjiang is matched only by its refusal to acknowledge its own abysmal human rights record. From systemic racial discrimination to gun violence and mistreatment of immigrants, the United States has a long history of human rights abuses that it conveniently sweeps under the rug.

Internationally, the United States continues to flout international human rights conventions while wreaking havoc through its military interventions, leaving a trail of humanitarian disasters in its wake. Its complicity in the ongoing crisis in Gaza, where it prioritizes military support for Israel over calls for ceasefire, further underscores its hypocrisy on human rights issues.

Year after year, the United States hypocritically issues these so-called "human rights reports," shamelessly pointing fingers at other nations while conveniently turning a blind eye to its own egregious human rights violations. This glaring double standard exposes the moral bankruptcy of Washington's stance on human rights.

It is long overdue for Washington to engage in sincere introspection and cease its futile attempts to weaponize human rights as a tool for political manipulation. Instead of smearing China, Washington should confront its own glaring human rights failures with honesty and accountability.

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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 17-4-2024
**IMF raises India's GDP forecast to
 6.8% in '24**

To remain fastest growing economy

PTI

Washington, The International Monetary Fund on Tuesday raised India's growth projection to 6.8 per cent from its January forecast of 6.5 per cent citing bullish domestic demand conditions and a rising working-age population.

With this, India continues to be the fastest growing economy of the world, ahead of China's growth projection of 4.6 per cent during the same period.

"Growth in India is projected to remain strong at 6.8 per cent in 2024 and 6.5 per cent in 2025, with the robustness reflecting continuing strength in domestic demand and a rising working-age population," said the latest edition of the World Economic Outlook released by the IMF.

At the same time, growth in emerging and developing Asia is expected to fall from an estimated 5.6 per cent in 2023 to 5.2 per cent in 2024 and 4.9 per cent in 2025, a slight upward revision compared with the January 2024 WEO Update.

IMF in its January update had projected 6.5 per cent growth for India in 2024.

Global growth, estimated at 3.2 per cent in 2023, is projected to continue at the same pace in 2024 and 2025.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 30-4-2024

**Indian economy expected to achieve
 higher than 7% growth in 2024-25:**

NCAER

Rajeev Jayaswal

The latest edition of EY Economy Watch released on Monday also has similar observations which said India's FY25 growth continues the 7% plus post Covid. The Indian economy is expected to achieve "higher" than 7% growth in 2024-25, the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) on Monday said pointing at strong high-frequency indicators, an above normal monsoon forecast and a benign global outlook.

The think tank's outlook is a bit more optimistic than the 7% real gross domestic product (GDP) growth projected by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in its monetary policy review on April 5. While the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on April 11 projected India's GDP growth for FY25 at 7%, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on April 16 raised India's growth forecast the fiscal year to 6.8% from 6.5%.

NCAER expects India to gain further boost from an improvement in the global GDP growth, which will create demands for Indian goods. IMF projected a resilient global economic outlook in its World Economic Outlook to 3.2% in 2025 from 3.1% in 2024.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) has also projected that the global merchandise trade volume will grow by 2.6% in 2024, following a 1.2% decline in 2023.

"Projected acceleration in both global growth and trade volumes as well as forecast of an above normal monsoon indicate that the Indian economy can again attain growth rates higher than 7% during the current fiscal year," NCAER director general Poonam Gupta said.

Citing some high frequency indicators, NCAER in its monthly economic review said while PMI for manufacturing increased to 59.6 in March, it remained robust for services too, increasing to 61.2, showing signs of expansion of the economy. "Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections reached a value of Rs. 1.8 lakh crore in March 2024, the second best since its rollout in 2017, while UPI recorded 13.4 billion transactions (in volume) in March 2024, the highest ever since its introduction with a growth of 55.3% on a year-over-year basis," it said.

The latest edition of EY Economy Watch released on Monday also has similar observations. "India's FY25 growth continues the 7% plus post Covid performance for the fourth successive year," EY chief policy advisor D.K. Srivastava said in the report.

"With an expectation of a normal south-west monsoon, the RBI expects a pick-up in rural activity backed by a favorable base effect, leading to pick up in growth of private consumption. It also expects the services sector to grow above the pre-pandemic trend. In its assessment, the prospects of fixed investment remain bright in view of healthy corporate and bank balance sheet and robust government capital expenditure which may have some crowding in impact," he said. The budget presented on February 1 continued the government's focus on capital expenditure to spur growth with an outlay of ₹11.11 lakh crore, over 11% year-on-year jump.

Both experts saw declining inflation as a positive factor. "CPI inflation eased marginally to 4.9% in March 2024 as inflation in fuel and light and food items eased. Core CPI inflation remained stable at 3.3% in March 2024. WPI inflation also remained low at 0.5% in March 2024, close to its level at 0.2% in February 2024," Srivastava said.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 24-4-2024

**Govt aims to grab 10% agri exports
 market**

Rajeev Jayaswal

The government is preparing a five-year action plan to grab 10% of the \$405 billion exports market of 20 farm produce such as mangoes, banana, ghee, buffalo meat and alcoholic beverages, which could be unveiled by the central government after the general elections, officials aware of the development said.

According to Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA), India's current market share in these 20 items is a mere 2.3% or \$9.04 billion, which could be ramped up significantly to boost farmers' income without hurting the country's food security as they do not include regulated items such as rice and wheat, they said, requesting not to be named. HT launches Crick-it, a one stop destination to catch Cricket, anytime, anywhere. Explore now!

This is part of the government's plan to make India the third-largest economy of the world, one of them said. The current regime has tasked bureaucrats to prepare development agenda of respective ministries for the next five years. The next government will unveil these strategies in the first 100 days of its term, he added.

The strategy is also important to make up for about 5-6% year-on-year dip in exports of agricultural items in 2023-24, he said. "The fall in agri exports was mainly due to export curbs on regulated products such as non-basmati rice, wheat, maize, onion and tomatoes, mainly to ensure adequate domestic supply and check inflation," he said.

India's rice exports in 2023-24 fall by 6.5% to \$10.41 billion in the year to March compared to \$11.14 billion in the preceding financial year. Exports of other cereals saw a sharp 57% annualised fall to \$518 million.

"The strategy will also have space to quickly export surplus quantities of regulated products such as onion and potatoes so that farmers do not face glut situation," a second official said. The strategy is being prepared by the commerce ministry along with its arm Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) after stakeholders consultations.

Rajesh Agarwal, additional secretary in the department of commerce, confirmed the development. The plan will have "whole of the government approach", factoring in inputs of related ministries and state governments, he said.

Exports of agricultural products are necessary to boost farm income, Agarwal said. India's agricultural GDP grew by only 0.7% in 2023-24, down from 4.7% in 2022-23, as global headwinds such as the Red Sea crisis and Ukraine conflict hit exports, according to APEDA. The state-run agency, which is responsible for only 52% of India's overall agri exports, saw 6.85% fall in outbound shipments at \$22.4 billion in April-February 2023-24 compared to \$24 billion in the same period of 2022-23.

The 20 identified products include fresh grapes, banana, pomegranate, watermelon, mangoes, guava, onion, green chilly, capsicum, okra, garlic, groundnut, alcoholic beverages, cashew nut, buffalo meat, natural honey, ghee, jaggery and confectionary, APEDA chairman Abhishek Dev said. These items have huge export potential in countries like the US, Malaysia, Canada, Russia, Germany, France, Korea, China, Indonesia, Japan, Italy, Belgium and the UK.

In order to reduce logistics costs while maintaining quality of fruits and vegetables during transport, APEDA is working on sea protocols for individual items such as pineapple, mangoes, oranges, bananas, pomegranates and other fruits and vegetables. Transportation via sea routes, instead of air transport, would not only be cheaper, but also give advantage of quantity and enhance competitiveness of Indian products, Dev said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 18-4-2024

Centre notifies liberalised FDI norms for space sector

New Delhi, The government has notified amendments to the foreign direct investment policy in the space sector to attract offshore investors in satellite manufacturing and satellite launch vehicles segments.

Amendment made in the FDI policy for the space sector through a gazette notification dated April 16, 2024, prescribes liberalised entry route and provides clarity for FDI in satellites, launch vehicles and associated systems or subsystems, creation of spaceports for launching and receiving Spacecraft and manufacturing of space-related components and systems.

The Union Cabinet earlier this year gave approval to these amendments. The notification comes days ahead of the scheduled visit of Tesla CEO Elon Musk who is expected to meet with various Indian space companies during his visit from April 21 to 22. Concurrently, approvals for Musk's satellite internet project, Starlink, are nearing finalization.

As per the notification, up to 74 per cent FDI for satellite manufacturing and operation, satellite data products and ground segment & user segment are allowed under automatic route. Beyond 74 per cent these activities are under government route. — **PTI**

Attracting investors

Up to 74% FDI for satellite manufacturing and operation, satellite data products and ground segment allowed under automatic route

FDI up to 49% permitted for launch vehicles, creation of spaceports for launching and receiving spacecraft under automatic route

Besides, 100% FDI allowed for manufacturing of components and systems for satellites without government nod

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 30-4-2024

China's trade edge

Delhi must reduce dependence on wily Beijing

IN its 2024 election manifesto, the BJP has stated that the Make in India programme, which was launched in September 2014, has contributed significantly to increasing manufacturing activity in the country. The ruling party has promised to make India a 'trusted global manufacturing hub'. However, a report by

economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) suggests that the country has a long way to go before it can achieve the grand goal of atmanirbharta (self-reliance). According to the report, India's imports from China jumped from about \$70 billion in 2018-19 to over \$101 billion in 2023-24, resulting in a cumulative trade deficit exceeding \$387 billion over a five-year period. Beijing's share in New Delhi's imports of industrial goods — telecom, machinery and electronics — has risen to 30 per cent from 21 per cent in the past 15 years, underlining India's increasing dependence on the Dragon for these items. No less dismal is the fact that India's exports to China have stagnated at around \$16 billion annually from 2019 to 2024. Even as India has stood firm against China on the diplomatic and military fronts after the Galwan clash of June 2020, it has not been able to stall the Chinese march in the economic arena. China continues to have the upper hand in bilateral trade despite India's repeated insistence that the resolution of the boundary dispute is a prerequisite for the restoration of normal relations. It is apparent that Beijing's ploy of delinking the border standoff from trade and business ties is paying rich dividends.

Ominously, the GTRI has estimated that Chinese imports will rise in the coming years. The huge trade deficit has strategic, economic and geopolitical implications for India. New Delhi needs to plug the gaps in the Make in India programme in order to make the manufacturing sector more productive and resilient. The dream of becoming a global manufacturing hub will remain just a dream unless India manages to shake off China's overbearing presence.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 17-4-2024

Govt asks traders to speed up pulses import from Myanmar using forex

Zia Haq

Last year, the government found that importers of pigeon pea and black gram were hoarding their purchases in Myanmar by not bringing them to India immediately

India and Myanmar have set up a new forex payment mechanism via the Punjab National Bank to ease cross-border movement of goods, especially pulses, which Indian importers are being encouraged to use to avoid logjams, a top official said.

Consumer affairs secretary Nidhi Khare last week reviewed trade arrangements between the two countries to speed up import of pulses from the conflict-ridden country, which is a major supplier of pigeon pea (tur) and black gram (urad) to India.

Last year, the government found that importers of pigeon pea and black gram were hoarding their purchases in Myanmar by not bringing them to India immediately. This had created artificial scarcity and stoked prices.

The consumer affairs ministry cracked down on hoarding by asking stockholding entities like supermarkets, millers and wholesalers to declare pulses inventories held by them on a weekly basis effective April 15.

The top bureaucrat in the consumer affairs virtually discussed with the Indian mission in Yangon issues related to pulses imports from Myanmar. Revised exchange rates had created a hurdle in seamless payments while stocks of pulses held by Indian importers in Myanmar have in the past created artificial scarcity.

The Indian mission apprised Khare that a rupee/kyat settlement mechanism had been operationalised in January to ease trade. The Central Bank of Myanmar has released guidelines for payment procedures under a special rupee vostro account. A vostro account is one in which a foreign bank provides financial services on behalf of a domestic bank, making transactions easier.

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 estimated.

"The new mechanism will apply for both sea and border trade and for trade in goods as well as services. Adoption of the mechanism by traders will reduce costs associated with currency conversions and eliminate complexities related to exchange rates by eliminating the need for multiple currency conversations," an official said, declining to be named.

The consumer affairs ministry is undertaking a campaign to disseminate information about the new payment mechanisms among pulses importers, who can now use rupee/kyat direct payment system using the vostro account through the Punjab National Bank.

To keep prices stable, the Centre has put in a mechanism to closely monitor stock disclosures of pulses importers, traders and millers to check hoarding, which could stoke prices.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 23-4-2024

EU eases multiple-entry Schengen visa regime for frequent travellers in India

Rezaul H Laskar

EU ambassador Hervé Delphin announced the adoption of specific rules on issuing multiple-entry visas to Indian nationals by the European Commission

NEW DELHI: The European Union (EU) has adopted new visa rules that will allow frequent travellers from

India to apply for multiple-entry Schengen visas with longer validity, easing travel to 29 European countries. The adoption of specific rules on issuing multiple-entry visas to Indian nationals by the European Commission on April 18 was announced by EU ambassador herve delphin in a post on X on Monday.

“Travel to Europe made easy! [EU] takes another step towards enhancing people-to-people contact with [India]. New #Schengen #visa regime gives frequent travellers access to multi-year visa (up to 5 y.) Europe delivers on the partnership!” Delphin said in his post.

The Schengen visa area comprises 25 EU member states and four non-EU countries, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

The new rules are more favourable than the standard rules of the Schengen visa code that applied to date, the EU delegation to India said in a statement.

The new visa “cascade” regime for Indian nationals residing in India and applying for short-stay Schengen visas will provide “easier access to visas with multi-year validity for travellers with an established travel history”, the statement said.

Under the new rules, Indian nationals can be issued long-term, multi-entry Schengen visas valid for two years after they have obtained and used two visas within the previous three years. This two-year visa will be followed by a five-year visa, if the passport has sufficient remaining validity.

“During the validity period of these visas, holders enjoy travel rights equivalent to visa-free nationals,” the statement said.

The decision was made in the “context of strengthened relations under the EU-India Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility, which seeks comprehensive cooperation on migration policy between the EU and India”. The common agenda is also aimed at facilitating people-to-people contacts “due to the importance of India as a partner for the EU”.

Schengen visas allow the holder to travel freely in the Schengen area for short stays of a maximum of 90 days within any 180-day period. The visas are not purpose-bound but they do not grant the right to work.

The Schengen area consists of Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 22-4-2024 **BD, Nepal Commerce Secretaries agree** **to finalize PTA**

Business Correspondent

Bangladesh and Nepal in a commerce secretary level meeting laid emphasis on finalizing the draft Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) between the two

countries aiming at boosting bilateral trade between the two neighbors. Both sides also agreed to sign a Customs Mutual Assistance Agreement (CMMA) to facilitate exchange of Customs-related data and information. The meeting had also reiterated the importance of harmonizing and streamlining customs procedures to bolster trade facilitation.

Efforts to simplify and expedite visa procedures for Bangladeshi businesspersons were also discussed during the meeting. The 7th Commerce Secretary Level Meeting (7th CSLM) between the two countries was held in the Nepalese capital Kathmandu on April 18-19, said a press release.

The Bangladesh delegation was led by Tapan Kanti Ghosh, Senior Secretary, Ministry of Commerce while the Nepalese delegation was led by Dinesh Kumar Ghimire, Secretary (Commerce and Supplies), Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies.

Each delegation included officials from relevant ministries and was accompanied by ambassadors from both countries.

Both sides expected that the proposed PTA will foster increased trade from both sides facilitating duty-free market access or preferential access for each others goods.

It was also agreed that the Trade Negotiating Committee (TNC) would convene promptly to conclude the PTA text, Rules of Origin, and product lists.

Both delegation leaders expressed satisfaction on the excellent bilateral relations. The secretary level meeting discussed various pertinent issues for further strengthening Bangladesh-Nepal trade and economic cooperation.

Recognizing the pivotal role of seamless connectivity in bolstering trade relations, Bangladesh and Nepal stressed the importance of implementing the cargo protocol under the BBIN-MVA agreement (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement).

In view of the both countries forthcoming graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2026, the meeting underscored the potential challenges affecting market access.

Paramount importance of collaboration was highlighted in addressing these challenges while promoting bilateral trade and fostering enhanced connectivity from both sides.

Welcoming the recent development in power sector cooperation with Nepal, Bangladesh has emphasized the necessity of a secure, long-term power supply arrangement dedicated transmission infrastructure, and comprehensive investor protection for Bangladeshi investors.

The meeting reviewed existing bilateral Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) pertaining to agriculture and trade-related technical regulations and stressed the importance of effective implementation of these MoUs

to foster a favorable environment for businessmen from both nations.

The meeting decided to hold the next Commerce Secretary-Level Meeting (CSLM) in Bangladesh at a mutually convenient time.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 24-4-2024

BD-Qatar ink five agreements, five MoUs

Diplomatic Correspondent

Bangladesh and Qatar have signed five agreements and five memorandums of understanding (MoUs) on Tuesday for mutual benefit and to boost bilateral cooperation.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Emir of the State of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani witnessed the signing ceremony at the Prime Minister Office (PMO) on Tuesday following an official talks held between the two sides.

On the arrival of Emir at the PMO, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina welcomed him at the Tiger Gate with flower bouquet. They also had a Tête-à-tête (one-to-one meeting) and a bilateral meeting. A high-level Qatari delegation headed by Qatar's Emir paid a state visit to Bangladesh at the invitation of the President and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

The agreements are: avoidance of double taxation and prevention of fiscal evasion with respect of taxes in income between Bangladesh and Qatar, cooperation in legal field between the government of Bangladesh and State of Qatar, maritime transport between the two countries, promotion and protection of mutual investment, and establishment of the Bangladesh-Qatar joint business council.

Five MoUs include cooperation in the field of manpower employment (labor), cooperation in the field of ports (MWANI Qatar and Chattogram port authority), cooperation in the field of education, higher education and scientific research, cooperation in youth and sports, and cooperation in diplomatic training.

At the ceremony, a road and a park in the capital city of Dhaka were named after Qatar Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani.

The park is being built in Balur field in Kalshi area of Mirpur under Dhaka North City Corporation, while the road is from the Mirpur ECB Chattwar to Kalsi Fly Over.

Now, the road and the park will be known as Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani Avenue and Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani Park respectively.

Among the agreements, Qatar Trade and Industry Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad Al Thani and Bangladesh Industries Minister Nurul Majid Mahmud Humayun put pen on the agreement on Promotion and Protection of Mutual Investments between the two countries.

Agreement on the Avoidance of Double Taxation and Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with Respect to Taxes in Income was signed by State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar Sultan bin Saad Al Muraikhi and Bangladesh State Minister for Finance Waseqa Ayesha Khan.

Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Anisul Huq of Bangladesh and State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar Sultan bin Saad Al Muraikhi signed the agreement on Cooperation in the Legal Field on behalf of their respective countries.

Agreement on Maritime Transport between Qatar and Bangladesh was signed by State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar Sultan bin Saad Al Muraikhi and State Minister for Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury.

Chairman of Qatar Chamber of Commerce and Industry (QCCI) Sheikh Khalifa bin Jassim Al Thani and President of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI) Mahbulul Alam signed the agreement on Establishment of the Bangladesh-Qatar Joint Business Council.

Among the MoUs, Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dr Hasan Mahmud and State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar Sultan bin Saad Al Muraikhi inked the MoU on cooperation in diplomatic training on behalf of their respective sides.

Apart from this, Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dr Hasan Mahmud and State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar Sultan bin Saad Al Muraikhi also signed the MoU on cooperation in the field of education, higher education and scientific research between Bangladesh and Qatar.

MoU on cooperation in youth and sports was signed by Bangladesh Youth and Sports Minister Nazmul Hassan and State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar Sultan bin Saad Al Muraikhi.

State Minister for Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment of Bangladesh Shafiqur Rahaman Chowdhury and State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar Sultan bin Saad Al Muraikhi signed the MoU on cooperation in the field of manpower employment (labour).

MoU on cooperation in the field of ports (MWANI Qatar and Chittagong port authority) was signed by State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar Sultan bin Saad Al Muraikhi and State Minister for Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury.

Before departing from the PMO, the Emir signed the Visitors Book at the Tiger Gate.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 25-4-2024

BD, Sri Lankan arbitration centers sign MoU

Business Correspondent

For international dispute resolution, the Bangladesh International Arbitration Centre (BIAC) and the Sri Lanka National Arbitration Centre (SLNAC) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) at the BIAC office in Dhaka, on Monday.

BIAC Vice Chairman Muhammad A. (Rume) Ali and SLNAC Chief Executive Seedantha Kulatilake signed the MoU on behalf of their respective organizations, says a press release. This collaborative endeavor holds the promise of enhancing trade and investment relations between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka by facilitating the exchange of vital information and organizing joint activities to raise awareness of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) among businesses. Moreover, it includes the utilization of each others infrastructure facilities to conduct arbitrations, mediations, and conciliation proceedings, thereby optimizing resources and enhancing efficiency in resolving disputes, says the press release.

SLNAC Chairman Hiran de Alwis commended BIAC for its proactive approach in initiating the MoU and helping both countries to work together for the promotion of ADR mechanisms as a means for peaceful settlement of international trade and investment disputes. BIAC Chairman Mahbubur Rahman, along with Vice Chairman of BIAC detailed the existing scenario of ADR and BIACs pivotal role in establishing best practices in institutional arbitration within Bangladesh and across South Asia.

Established in 1985, SLNAC stands as a pioneering institution in administering arbitrations for the resolution of commercial disputes in the country.

Among the dignitaries from SLNAC present at the signing ceremony were SLNAC Board Member Priyantha Gamage and SLNAC Coordinator Johann Atapattu, Sri Lanka High Commission Counsellor (Commercial).

Srimali Jayarathna, BIAC Senior Counsel Ms. Priyanka Roy and Assistant Counsel Ms. Moyee Mina Haque were also present.

The signing of this MoU marks the beginning of a new chapter in the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, underlining the shared commitment towards promoting peace and prosperity through effective dispute resolution mechanisms, adds the press release.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 21-4-2024

Sri Lanka's economy and debt restructuring: key points

Following the economic downturn in Sri Lanka last year, the initiation of debt restructuring became essential in light of the country's economic collapse. The question remains, how should this restructuring process unfold, and what path should the nation's economy follow?

This article is compiled from statements provided by Prof. Wijitapure Wimalarathana Thera, President of the Sri Lanka Economists Association, Minister of Transport, Highways, and Mass Media, Dr. Bandula Gunawardena, and Prof. Priyanga Dunusinghe from the

Department of Economics at the University of Colombo during a recent panel discussion telecast over ITN.

Minister Dr. Bandula Gunawardena contributed to the discussion as an economic analyst.

The following are excerpts from the discussion: "Borrowing as a country is not inherently problematic. However, issues can arise if those loans are not invested in high-yielding sectors.

The country's economic situation has deteriorated to the point where it is struggling to meet its debt obligations due to several factors. Despite past reliance on tourism, rubber and coconut exports, and the garment industry, the economy's dependence on these sectors has posed challenges, especially with changing global dynamics. While there has been income from the export of spices, it has not been sufficient to offset other economic challenges.

The reluctance of Sri Lankan expatriates to return and invest in the country poses a challenge to addressing the debt situation. Encouraging investment from retired individuals and those working abroad could alleviate the need for debt restructuring.

Efforts are under way to restructure the loan in collaboration with the lending parties, dividing it into three main categories. Firstly, loans sourced from the market; secondly, bilateral loans from countries such as Japan, India, and China; and thirdly, multilateral loans from institutions like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

Given this situation, it is crucial to determine whether we want to bolster our country's economic standing or not. The agreement we have entered into with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has given Sri Lanka a respite. We must remember the dire economic conditions we faced two years ago, in 2022.

When our foreign reserves dwindled to zero, it became evident that we were unable to meet our debt obligations. In response to this crisis, former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa initiated a call for international applications aimed at fortifying the country's economy and seeking solutions to our financial woes.

Amidst the global trend of countries grappling with debt repayment, Sri Lanka faced a similar challenge. Consequently, 28 applications were submitted to address the country's economic woes, with 20 of them meeting the criteria. A Cabinet sub-committee, chaired by Prof. G.L. Peiris was tasked with selecting the most suitable company to tackle the issue. Following careful deliberation, France's Lazard Company was chosen after a thorough examination of the facts.

At that juncture, we geared up to implement the recommendations for debt restructuring in the country. However, complications arose when a lawsuit of US\$ 250 million was filed in the Hamilton court in the United States due to non-payment of debt. Given our lack of experienced legal representation in handling

such cases, we enlisted the services of the seasoned law firm, Clifford Chance Company, to navigate through these challenges. These were the hurdles we encountered during that period.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe engaged in discussions with the President, Prime Minister and the Finance Minister of India regarding the outstanding debt obligations. Similar talks were held with the Prime Minister of China. Multilateral lenders such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are facilitating loan repayments. Efforts are under way to address other outstanding loan payments as well.

Outstanding

Under the current agreement with the IMF, approximately 37 percent of the outstanding loan amount deemed unpayable will be settled within the initial 5-6 years of commencing loan repayments.

Subsequently, around 51 percent of the loans are slated for repayment over the following 20 years. The remaining 12 percent of the loan balance will be addressed after the initial 20-year period. Thus, by the year 2048, regardless of Presidential or Governmental changes, these agreements remain unalterable. Any attempt to deviate from these agreements could impede the country's progress. This sentiment was underscored by the head of the IMF Sri Lanka program chief Peter Breuer, who stated before departing that "Sri Lanka's future trajectory is now on a well-defined path." Given our country's inability to generate vast wealth, initiatives like the Port City, valued at US\$ 1.4 billion, and the sale of the Hambantota Port, which earned only US\$ 1.4 billion, represent significant but limited sources of revenue. In light of this, gradual measures must be implemented to alleviate the country's debt burden over time.

Highways are undeniably convenient and essential for our infrastructure, yet they also represent a substantial debt burden. Consequently, the responsibility for highways was transferred to the Sahasya Investment Company. While highways can yield significant profits, amounting to Rs. 5 billion annually, the loan obligation for highways stands at a staggering Rs. 800 billion. At this rate, using the Rs. 5 billion profit per year to repay the debt would require another 160 years to settle it fully.

With tea exports yielding a maximum of Rs. 1.3 billion and rubber and coconut exports potentially earning Rs. 2 billion each, it is evident that innovation and technical advancements should guide our actions.

The restructuring of bilateral and commercial debt should adhere to a systematic approach to avoid scenarios like deforestation seen in Latin American and African nations. Learning from countries affected by credit crises can offer valuable insights into effective measures.

Over the 32-year span from 1980 to 2022, there were 433 debt restructurings involving 95 countries. Some

nations underwent debt restructuring multiple times, with certain countries undergoing the process up to four or five times. Notably, only Mexico and Chile managed to stabilise their economies following their initial restructuring efforts.

Restructured

Argentina has undergone debt restructuring on five occasions, while Brazil has restructured its debt twice. Venezuela has gone through the process six times, and Ecuador has restructured its debt five times. Given this reality, it is imperative to prioritise methods that enable us to navigate the debt crisis independently of the conditions set by the IMF, basing our approach on sound economic principles. Continuing to carry balance of payments arrears is not sustainable. Once a country falls into a credit crisis, its entire economy suffers. This affects not only imports and exports but also the overall economic landscape. Difficulties arise in opening letters of credit, as foreign countries lose confidence in the banking system of the debtor nation. Companies within the country face challenges in making overseas investments, further exacerbating the economic downturn due to the lack of investor confidence. Hence, tackling the debt crisis requires an economic approach. It is a course of action that cannot be reversed. Attempting to do so would plunge us into a deeper abyss than the one experienced in 2022. We risk becoming another Argentina within the next five years. It's crucial to understand that in such dire circumstances, the nation stands to lose its workforce, compounding the economic challenges we face.

Currently, the youth of our nation are steadily migrating abroad. Eventually, what we will be left with is a population that lacks opportunities both domestically and internationally. This scenario mirrors what has occurred in Latin American and African nations.

Our nation's economy has suffered greatly due to several factors, including the substantial size of the public service, the distribution of fuel at subsidised rates, and the relatively low Government revenue. For instance, in 2022, while the Government's total tax revenue amounted to Rs. 1,751 million, a significant portion of Rs. 1,265 million was allocated to the public service and Rs. 506 million to subsidies, resulting in a budget deficit.

In 2023, the Government's total revenue from various sources amounted to Rs. 3 trillion, while its expenditure reached Rs. 4 trillion. Given this scenario, any subsidies provided should be supported by a corresponding source of income.

While anyone can advocate for relief measures, the challenge lies in the reluctance of individuals to contribute from their personal wealth. To address this, there is a proposition to increase tax revenue. For instance, there's a suggestion circulating in society that senior citizens should receive a 15 percent interest rate, akin to previous years.

To achieve this VAT should be raised by 1 percent. It is crucial for the population to grasp this reality. In other nations, tax revenue can reach up to 25 percent of GDP, but our country has not achieved this. Throughout history, promises like “I’ll offer bread at Rs. 3.50,” “I’ll raise salaries by 10,000 rupees,” or “I’ll deposit 25,000 rupees into fixed accounts” have been made, leading to potential bankruptcy.

Even with maximum effort amidst the credit crisis, it is improbable to elevate the Per Capita Income to US\$ 13,000. India is currently striving to double that figure to US\$ 26,000 as part of its plan. Hence, the notion of “Indian people coming to this country for low wages” should be dismissed. What we truly need is the right leadership and a cadre of intelligent individuals.”

Translated by Maneshka Borham

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 21-4-2024

Korea increases employment quota for Sri Lanka

Skilled workers and seasonal agricultural jobs

By Sugeeswara Senadhira

A large number of jobs will be available for Sri Lankan youths this year as a result of the discussions held by Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena with his Korean counterpart, Han Duck Soo in Seoul and with Governor of Gyeongsangbuk-du Province, Lee Cheol Woo in Andong.

In addition to the labour force that provides jobs for agriculture, construction and other industries in his country, the Korean Prime Minister also mentioned the possibility of providing new jobs for health services and professional services.

Governor of Gyeongsangbuk-du Lee Cheol Woo agreed to provide employment to Sri Lankan workers under a short-term provision of human resources required in Korea only for the harvesting season. This is in addition to the skilled workers and professionals employed in Korea. There are currently over 20,000 Sri Lankans employed in Korea.

Premier Gunawardena thanked the Korean Prime Minister for assistance provided during the recent economic crisis and Premier Han Duck Soo said that his country, as a member of the Paris Club, will always stand to support Sri Lanka and congratulate the Sri Lankan government for its achievement of recovering from the recent financial crisis, to successfully carry out its future activities.

Sri Lanka expressed appreciation to the Government and the people of Korea for the assistance extended during the Covid-19 pandemic and acknowledged with appreciation the higher education opportunities and training programs provided for Sri Lankans through the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), Korean Official Development Assistance (ODA) and other institutions.

Prime Minister Han Duck Soo, while discussing Korean investments, requested Sri Lanka to take measures to reduce the time for the preliminary work for the future projects to be implemented. He assured Premier Gunawardena that the currently agreed projects in the areas of renewable energy, fisheries sector and joint investment areas will be implemented expeditiously. The Korean Prime Minister stressed the importance of further increasing the space for floating solar power installations.

Two Prime Ministers agreed to explore the huge potential for collaboration in the tourism sector. The Korean Prime Minister added that the Korean people are also very interested in visiting Sri Lanka and expressed his agreement to support the provision of more opportunities to visit Sri Lanka, which is one of the most attractive tourist destinations in the world.

When Prime Minister Gunawardena was holding the portfolio of the Minister of Education, the move to include the Korean Language as a subject in the curriculum was praised by the Korean Prime Minister.

During the talks with Governor of Gyeongsangbuk-du Province, Lee Cheol Woo in Andong, the Provincial Government agreed to offer many benefits for education and higher education, agriculture, fisheries, women and rural development in Sri Lanka. They also discussed the potential for launching investment projects too.

The agreements were reached on providing more smart classrooms for schools, information technology equipment for vocational training institutes for school leavers who do not enrol for higher education, increasing opportunities for university entrance, increasing scholarship opportunities and providing more employment opportunities in Korea for Sri Lankans.

Premier Gunawardena discussed with the Governor possible investments in health, construction sectors, new technology for fisheries sector, providing consultancy on post-harvest damage mitigation, direct and indirect provision for women empowerment activities.

Governor of Gyeongsangbuk-du Lee Cheol Woo recalled his visit to Sri Lanka last year to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between leading Korean philanthropic institution, the Saemaul Foundation which is based in his province and Sri Lanka

Saemaul Undong (SU), the New Village Movement (or “SU movement,” as it is often referred to), was a government-oriented Community-Driven Development (CDD) program pursued during the 1970s in the Republic of Korea. Ultimately, this was the key program in the country’s long-term economic development initiative implemented during the latter half of the 20th century.

Under the MoU signed with Ministry of Public Administration, Home Affairs, Provincial Councils and Local Government, and External Resource Department, Ministry of Finance, the Saemaul Foundation, launched

the Digital Saemaul initiative in Sri Lanka. Five schools were selected in the Sabaragamuwa and Central Provinces to develop smart classrooms and completed the classrooms with 150 Nos. of computers with tables and chairs, 10 Nos. of smart boards and 10 Nos. of printers, worth more than 36.5 million as a donation. Five Schools, Gampola St. Joseph's Balika Maha Vidyalaya, Kandy District, Central Province, Namini Oya Central Collage, Matale District, Central Province, Ginigathhena Central Collage, Nuwara Eliya District, Central Province, Amb/ Godakawela Kularathna Vidyalaya, Ratnapura District, Sabaragamuwa Province, Ke/ Ranwala Mahanaga Vidyalaya, Kegalle District, Sabaragamuwa Province received completed Smart Classrooms under this program.

The Saemaul Smart Classroom Handover Ceremony took place under the patronage of the Prime Minister at Temple trees. The event was attended by Ambassador of the Republic of Korea, Miyon Lee, Education Minister Susil Premajayatha, State Minister of Provincial Councils and Local Government, Janka Wakkumbura, State Minister, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ashoka Priyantha, Governor of Sabaragamuwa Province, Naveen Dissanayake, Governor of Central Province, Lalith U. Gamage, Member of Parliament Yadamini Gunawardena and Principals and students.

Prime Minister Gunawardena said, "I would like to thank the Governor for giving us this opportunity for visiting a very success story of new economic growth that has been led in this province. The cooperation that has been extended to other countries by Saemaul Foundation with the blessings of the Governor has benefited, especially Kegalle and Ratnapura in the Sabaragamuwa Province."

The Prime Minister said, "I am glad that Governor himself visited Sri Lanka and signed this proposal for the welfare of these rural populations. And now it is in the implementation stages for which, we once again would like to thank you and the Saemaul Foundation for taking an initiative in these specific areas and we look forward to taking it further."

"President Ranil Wickremesinghe conveys his warm greetings which, I am honoured to mention here because we look forward to working with Korea closely on new technology and new investments applicable to many areas today. We hope this cooperation can be strengthened and taken forward for which I as the Prime Minister is visiting your province along with Members of Parliament."

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 16-4-2024

Exporters rue Indian anti-dumping charges on Nepali jute products

Binod Bhandari

India, Nepal's key trading partner, has been reluctant to remove the anti-dumping charges levied on Nepali readymade jute products, which has been hurting

exports for a long time, according to traders in eastern Nepal.

An anti-dumping duty is a protectionist tariff that a domestic government imposes on foreign imports that it believes are priced below fair market value.

Nearly a year ago, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, during his visit to India requested the Indian prime minister to remove anti-dumping charges on Nepali readymade jute products.

According to them, after the issue was raised, the Indian side had also informed them of conducting a study and tabling it at the secretary-level meeting of the two countries to remove the charges.

A year has passed, but nothing happened, traders lamented.

Previously, India had imposed a 12.5 percent countervailing duty on Nepali readymade jute products. It removed the countervailing duty, but later imposed 2 to 4 percent anti-dumping charges on the Nepali readymade jute products.

India has been imposing anti-dumping charges for the last seven years.

"India has not imposed anti-dumping charges on Bangladesh," said Raj Kumar Golchha, president of the Jute Industry Association. "With India imposing anti-dumping charges on Nepal, it has affected exports. The higher charges have made it difficult for the Nepali jute products to compete in the Indian market."

Other than jute products, India has been imposing anti-dumping charges on other products too, said Ramesh Rathi, vice-president of the association.

Nepali jute factories have been importing up to 70 percent of raw jute from India and Bangladesh and exporting readymade goods to India.

Nepal is exporting hessian jute cloth, jute thread and bags to India. With India imposing 2 to 4 percent anti-dumping charges on these goods Nepali jute exporters are paying a charge of Rs300 million annually to India.

The jute industry is one of the key employment-generating sectors in the Sunsari Morang Industrial Corridor. Currently, 12,000 people are engaged in producing jute products.

Until a decade ago, there were around 12 jute factories in the Sunsari Morang Industrial Corridor. Half of them have been shut down due to an unfavourable environment.

According to the Directorate of Agricultural Development in the Koshi province, 20 years ago, jute was cultivated in 40,000 hectares in Morang district alone. Now, that has shrunk to 5,070 hectares.

In Sunsari and Jhapa, jute farms covered 20,000 hectares and 10,000 hectares, respectively.

Now, they have shrunk to 1,300 hectares and 550 hectares, respectively.

Until two decades ago, Nepal used to produce 80,000 tonnes of jute annually, but this has plunged to 10,000 tonnes now, according to the directorate.

Along with the Indian anti-dumping charges, Nepali jute industry is not getting cash incentives promised by the Nepal government which has made the industry suffer. The export of jute products has declined by 7 percent in the first eight months of the current fiscal year ended in mid-March.

According to the Trade and Export Promotion Center, Nepal exported jute products worth Rs4.97 billion in the first eight months of the current fiscal year, which is a decline from Rs5.86 billion in the same period last fiscal year.

Nepal exported jute products worth Rs7.64 billion in the last fiscal year 2022-23.

The export of jute contributed 4.94 percent of the total export share.

Jute entrepreneurs said the decline in exports is mainly due to the Indian anti-dumping charges and Nepal's failure to provide attractive incentives to exporters.

Two years ago, the government removed the 70 percent subsidy on electricity provided to jute industries and decided to give 5 percent cash incentives (based on export value). Earlier the incentive was 3 percent.

"On top of the Indian anti-dumping charges, the Nepal government still has not provided the promised cash incentives. Both of these are responsible for the shrinkage in the industry and exports," Golchha said.

The demand for jute products is low due to the global economic slowdown, Golchha said. "In the last fiscal year, we exported jute products of Rs7 billion, but this year the export could dwindle to Rs5 billion," he said.

With the start of the current fiscal year in mid-July, Nepal rolled out the Nepal Trade Integrated Strategy (NTIS) 2023 by greatly expanding the list of promising export products and services from 12 to 32. The NTIS 2023 has also listed jute products as one of the export-oriented products.

Until three decades ago, Nepal was a major jute exporter to Europe. The crop was one of the major sources of foreign exchange.

Insiders say the industry started to disintegrate after the government became indifferent towards its growth.

THE RISING NEPAL, KATHMANDU 25-4-2024

Nepal-Qatar Joint Business Council formed By A Staff Reporter

Kathmandu: A Joint Business Council between Nepal and Qatar has been established, which includes the private sectors of both the nations.

An agreement was reached between the two chambers on Wednesday for the establishment of a council headed by President of Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Chandra Prasad Dhakal and President of Qatar Chamber, Sheikh Khalifa Bin Jassim Al Thani.

The agreement was signed by FNCCI President Dhakal and President of Qatar Chamber, Sheikh Khalifa Bin Jassim Al Thani in the presence of Emir Sheikh Tamim

bin Hamad Al Thani of Qatar and Prime Minister of Nepal Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'.

The council will work in the areas of business expansion, investment promotion, technology transfer and tourism promotion, according to FNCCI.

The Joint Business Council will be a permanent mechanism for dialogue with Qatar, a Gulf country experiencing rapid economic growth.

The purpose of the Joint Business Council is to increase cooperation and understanding between the private sectors of Nepal and Qatar. The council will play an effective role in attracting investments from Qatar and also expanding trade with the Gulf nation, which is known as a work destination for Nepalis. There is a high demand for agricultural products, water, herbs, spices and spice products in the Gulf countries. As Qatar is an investment destination due to its rapid economic expansion, the Joint Business Council will play an effective role in attracting investments in Nepal. The Council will also work in the field of tourism promotion.

After the establishment of the Council, cooperation between the two chambers is expected to further intensify and presidents of both the chambers are of the opinion that it will help in investment and business expansion. "This agreement will further increase cooperation in the coming days," said Sheikh Khalifa Bin Jassim Al Thani, President of the Qatar Chamber.

Meanwhile, FNCCI President Dhakal said that there would be more initiatives taken through the council to increase cooperation between Nepal and Qatar.

"The council will continue to work to benefit Nepal from Qatar's rapid economic development," said Dhakal. He added that the establishment of the Joint Business Council would help in attracting more investments in hydropower, tourism infrastructure, agro-processing and information and communication technology sectors.

In addition, the agreement between FNCCI and Qatar Chamber has also been renewed.

The new agreement was signed by FNCCI President Dhakal and Qatar Chamber President Sheikh Khalifa Bin Jassim Al Thani. This agreement was also signed in the presence of Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, Amir of Qatar, and Prime Minister of Nepal Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'. The first agreement between FNCCI and Qatar Chamber was made in 2005.

Since then, the two chambers have been cooperating in various ways for investment and business promotion.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 29-4-2024

Iran, Saudi Arabia discuss expansion of economic ties

TEHRAN - Iran's Consul General in Jeddah Hassan Zarnegar has met with the president of the Chamber of Commerce of Mecca, Saleh Abdullah Kamel, with the

two sides calling for increased trade and economic cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

During the meeting, Zarnegar emphasized the need to leverage the economic and trade capabilities of the two countries, as well as increased interactions between Iranian and Saudi businesspeople.

The two officials also discussed the economic aspects of providing services to pilgrims in the holy city of Mecca. Kamel expressed hope for the comprehensive development of Iran-Saudi relations, as emphasized by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.

The Governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) Mohammadreza Farzin has traveled to Saudi Arabia with the aim of developing monetary and banking relations.

According to the CBI Office of Public Relations, Farzin is also scheduled to attend a ceremony that is due to be held on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Islamic Development Bank.

Meeting and talking with heads of central banks of different countries, including Saudi Arabia, in line with the development of monetary and banking relations, is one of the plans of the head of the central bank in Saudi Arabia.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 27-4-2024

Iran, Pakistan private sectors call for finalizing free trade agreement

TEHRAN - The private sectors of Iran and Pakistan have stressed the need for finalizing a free trade agreement between the two neighboring countries.

Hamed Asgari, the director of international affairs of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA), and Atif Ikram Sheikh, the president of the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI), discussed a wide range of bilateral issues in a meeting in Pakistan.

Speaking during the meeting, the Iranian side urged the need for further joint investments by both the state and private sectors of Iran and Pakistan.

The creation of a joint free zone with the incentives and support of both governments will be an additional incentive for further cooperation, Asgari said.

He also highlighted the urgency of making improvements in the transportation and customs sectors, calling for removing tariff obstacles and problems hindering the money transfer.

Asgari further underscored the significance of cutting tariffs on bilateral trade and called for a free trade agreement between the two neighbors to be finalized at the earliest.

The president of the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry, for his part, said that the establishment of a joint special economic zone between Iran and Pakistan would be a positive step in the promotion of relations between the two countries.

The current level of trade between Tehran and Islamabad is far behind their potential, he said, urging the need for finalizing a free trade agreement between the two nations.

EF/

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 16-4-2024

Iran to launch several water projects in Sri Lanka

TEHRAN – Several major water and energy projects are going to be inaugurated by the presidents of Iran and Sri Lanka in the near future, ISNA reported.

The Uma Oya Multipurpose project which includes two dams namely Dyraaba and Puhulpola and also 25 kilometers of water transmission tunnel, is expected to be inaugurated in May in the presence of President Ebrahim Raisi.

The project also includes two major hydroelectric power plants each with a capacity of 60 megawatts.

Uma Oya multipurpose project is regarded as one of the greatest technical and engineering service projects of Iranian companies in Sri Lanka.

This project is located in the south-east of Sri Lanka 200km away from Colombo city.

The purpose of the project is to improve irrigation of 5000 acres of agricultural land, transferring 145 million cubic meters of water and generating 290 GW/h of power in a year.

One of the important features of the Uma Oya project is the scattered and diverse components of the project.

It should also be said that this project is one of the largest projects implemented by Iranian contractors abroad.

Back in August 2023, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry visited Iran and met with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir Abdollahian in Tehran. During a joint press conference, the top Iranian diplomat called the visit “a turning point in Iran-Sri Lanka ties”.

Amir Abdollahian said the two foreign ministers had discussed cooperation at regional and international levels and will be expanding ties in the fields of trade, tourism, science, and culture.

“During our meeting, we discussed new possible agreements and also emphasized the implementation of the ones that have already been signed,” said the top diplomat.

According to Amir Abdollahian, the two sides also discussed the exchange of prisoners.

The foreign minister concluded his talks by reiterating the Iranian government’s priorities, saying that Tehran attaches great significance to cooperation with fellow Asian countries. He hoped that different nations in the continent could collaborate in a friendly and constructive manner.

Sabry, for his part, hailed Sri Lanka’s good and friendly relations with Iran. Before his visit, Sri Lankan media reported that the foreign minister would be trying to

rejuvenate his country's presence in the Iranian tea market.

EF/

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 18-4-2024

Pakistan's Exports to Afghanistan Decline by Over 7% in Eight Months, Imports Drop by 59%

AT

Kabul: The State Bank of Pakistan has reported a more than seven percent decline in Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan over the past eight months. Pakistani media, citing the State Bank, also note a significant 59 percent decrease in the country's imports from Afghanistan during the same period. According to a report in Pakistan's national newspaper, China leads among Pakistan's neighboring countries in exports, with Bangladesh and Afghanistan following closely behind. The report details the decline in exports to Afghanistan from \$346 million to \$319 million, with imports dropping from \$13.54 million to \$5.44 million.

Maiwand Hotak, head of the Chamber of Commerce and Investment, emphasizes the importance of resolving any emerging issues concerning ports and passages with Pakistan promptly.

Meanwhile, the Afghan Ministry of Industry and Commerce reports a 24 percent decrease in exports to Pakistan and a 30 percent increase in imports from Pakistan over the past year. Akhandzada Abdul Salam Javad, spokesperson for the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, highlights the trade volume between Afghanistan and Pakistan during the year 1402, with exports totaling \$926 million and imports reaching \$1.517 billion.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan Joint Chamber of Commerce has urged Islamabad to extend the Karachi railway to Peshawar to facilitate and reduce the cost of goods transfer between the two countries. Naqibullah Safi, head of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Joint Chamber of Commerce, anticipates a decrease in transportation costs with the launch of this railway, benefiting traders on both sides. The chamber also seeks permission in Karachi for Afghan transit goods to be transferred to other containers and transported via rail to Torkham. These developments coincide with border tensions and forced deportations of Afghan migrants from Pakistan, cited as primary reasons for the decline in trade between the two countries over the past year.

THE KABUL TIMES, KABUL 28-4-2024

Afghanistan to carry out its entire trade with China through Wakhan Corridor

With the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and the improvement of the overall security situation in Afghanistan, trade relations have increased considerably between Afghanistan and

countries in the region, particularly China. Afghanistan wants to increase its trade relations with China; therefore, the Islamic Emirate has started construction work on Wakhan Corridor, extending from the Wakhan district of Badakhshan to the Chinese border. With the opening and completion of this route, Afghanistan and China will get direct access to each other's markets. This can reduce the distance and further lower the cost of the imports and exports of commercial goods between the two countries. With the opening and completion of the Wakhan Corridor, trade and bilateral relations between Afghanistan and China, considered as important and beneficial for both countries, will further increase.

It has been reported that the Afghan and Chinese governments have already started talks over the commencement of traffic through the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of territory in northeastern Badakhshan stretching 350 km to China. The construction of the road that directly links the two countries is considered as significant as it can somehow reduce Afghanistan's reliance on some regional countries for transit trade. In 2022, China's exports to Afghanistan reached \$ 550.13 million, while Afghanistan's exports to China reached \$40.02 million. Also, according to the existing estimates of trade between Afghanistan and China, the volume of bilateral trade between the two countries in 2023 was \$1.3 billion. There are hopes that the road will be opened for transit trade as construction work is seriously underway. The direct access of Afghanistan to China through this road will enable Afghanistan to carry out its entire trade of over \$1.3 billion with China through this route. In the meantime, the opening of this route will also be beneficial to China as it can further export its products to Afghanistan and other markets in the region. With the opening and completion of this road, China will become Afghanistan's main trading partner comparing to other partners in the region. The current trend of increasing the amount of bilateral trade between the two countries shows a growing trend compared to other neighbors. With this, trade via the Wakhan Corridor will speed up the economy between the two countries.

The construction of this road will also benefit other countries as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran and Pakistan as it creates a significant opportunity for increasing trade and economic activity in the region. This route can further facilitate the trade of various commercial goods between the respective countries. Statistics show that in the past two and half years, Afghanistan's economic and trade relations with all countries in the region have been expanding for the past two and half years. There are hopes that with the opening and completion of the Wakhan Corridor, the exports and imports of commercial goods between Afghanistan and countries in the region will further increase. Mashal Noori

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 17-4-2024
Pakistan to grow at 2pc, face 25pc
inflation: IMF

Khaleeq Kiani

ISLAMABAD: Notwithstanding a relatively better global outlook, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Tuesday maintained Pakistan's economic growth prospects for the current fiscal year at two per cent, which it had revised downward in January from its previous estimate of 2.5pc.

In its flagship World Economic Outlook (WEO 2024), released on Tuesday, the IMF kept the country's growth rate at 3.5pc for the next fiscal year. In January, the Fund had lowered the current year's growth rate by 0.5pc from 2.5pc and by 0.1pc from 3.6pc for FY25, which it anticipated in October 2023.

The growth estimates are based on the Fund's recent quarterly review of Pakistan's macroeconomic position as part of the \$3bn Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) on which the two sides reached a Staff-Level Agreement (SLA) on March 20.

The IMF forecast is slightly higher than projections made by its Washington-based cousin — the World Bank — at 1.8pc early this month. The IMF's growth forecast is significantly lower than the government's 3.5pc GDP growth target for the current year but generally in line with the State Bank of Pakistan's expectation of 2pc to 3pc announced last month as part of the Monetary Policy Statement.

Lender lifts global growth forecast to 3.2pc this year

The IMF estimated that Pakistan's average inflation will decelerate to 24.8pc this year from 29.2pc last year and further slow to 12.7pc in FY25. Also, the Fund projected the current account deficit increasing to 1.1pc of GDP this year from 0.7pc last year and rising further to 1.2pc next year.

On the other hand, the IMF estimated that the unemployment rate would gradually decline from 8.5pc in FY23 to 8pc this year and 7.5pc next fiscal year.

Raises global growth

In the WEO report, the IMF raised the global growth rate for 2024 to 3.2pc, 0.1pc higher than its 3.1pc forecast of January and significantly higher than its October forecast of 2.9pc. "The forecast for 2024 is revised up by 0.1bps from January and by 0.3bps from October 2023".

The pace of expansion is low by historical standards, owing to both near-term factors, such as still-high borrowing costs and withdrawal of fiscal support, and longer-term effects from the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine; weak growth in productivity; and increasing geo-economic fragmentation.

The WEO expected the global headline inflation to fall from an annual average of 6.8pc in 2023 to 5.9pc in 2024 and 4.5pc in 2025, with advanced economies returning to their inflation targets sooner than emerging

market and developing economies. The latest forecast for global growth five years from now — at 3.1pc — is at its lowest in decades. The pace of convergence toward higher living standards for middle- and lower-income countries has slowed, implying persistence in global economic disparities, the IMF said.

The relatively weak medium-term outlook reflects lower GDP per person growth stemming, notably, from persistent structural frictions preventing capital and labour from moving to productive firms. It noted that dimmer prospects for growth in China and other large emerging market economies will weigh on the prospects of trading partners, given their increasing share of the global economy.

"Risks to the global outlook are now broadly balanced", the IMF said but noted on the downside that new price spikes stemming from geopolitical tensions, including those from the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza and Israel, could, along with persistent core inflation where labour markets are still tight, raise interest rate expectations and reduce asset prices.

A divergence in disinflation speeds among major economies could also cause currency movements that put financial sectors under pressure. High interest rates could have greater cooling effects than envisaged as fixed-rate mortgages reset and households contend with high debt, causing financial stress. "In China, without a comprehensive response to the troubled property sector, growth could falter, hurting trading partners", the WEO warned.

Moreover, amid high government debt in many economies, a disruptive turn to tax hikes and spending cuts could weaken activity, erode confidence, and sap support for reform and spending to reduce risks from climate change. Also, geo-economic fragmentation could intensify, with higher barriers to the flow of goods, capital, and people implying a supply-side slowdown.

On the upside, looser fiscal policy than necessary and assumed in projections could raise economic activity in the short term, although risking more costly policy adjustments later on. Inflation could fall faster than expected amid further gains in labour force participation, allowing central banks to bring easing plans forward. Artificial intelligence and stronger structural reforms than anticipated could spur productivity.

The IMF advocated the near-term priority for central banks to ensure that inflation touched down smoothly, by neither easing policies prematurely nor delaying too long and causing target undershoots as the global economy approached a soft landing. At the same time, as central banks take a less restrictive stance, a renewed focus on implementing medium-term fiscal consolidation to rebuild room for budgetary maneuver and priority investments, and to ensure debt sustainability, is in order. "Multilateral cooperation is

needed to limit the costs and risks of geo-economic fragmentation and climate change, speed the transition to green energy, and facilitate debt restructuring”, the WEO said.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 18-4-2024
Pakistan eyes multi-billion dollar investment after Saudi team visit

The premier also reiterated his commitment to working day and night for Pakistan’s progress and prosperity

By App & Muhammad Anis & News Desk

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, chairing a federal cabinet meeting here on Wednesday, hinted at Saudi Arabia investing billions of dollars in Pakistan.

In the wake of Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan’s recent successful visit, the premier told the cabinet members billions of dollars’ worth of investment was expected from the kingdom. Commending the efforts of the federal cabinet and relevant authorities for the successful visit, he said the Saudi delegation was impressed by the preparations of Pakistani ministers and officials.

The prime minister thanked Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for his special interest in Pakistan, which led to a successful visit by the Saudi delegation. “We must ensure completion of this investment in Pakistan with the same spirit and dedication,” he added and warned that no obstacles or hindrances in that regard would be tolerated. “Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have entered into a new phase of economic relations [with the current visit of delegation],” he added.

The premier also reiterated his commitment to working day and night for Pakistan’s progress and prosperity, as promised to the people. “If we continue to work hard, we will soon achieve Pakistan’s development, prosperity and economic stability.”

Later, briefing the media on cabinet decisions, Minister for Information and Broadcasting Attaullah Tarar said the federal cabinet held discussion on the recent visit of Saudi delegation to Pakistan and the expression of interest shown by the Saudi side for investment in different sectors. The information minister, while describing the visit as highly productive, said matters were expeditiously moving forward. He said another high-level Saudi delegation would visit Pakistan in the coming months to conclude agreements. He said a Saudi delegation from the private sector would also visit Pakistan very soon, and their investments and partnerships with Pakistani private sector would have a positive impact on national economy.

The minister said delegation-level visits from other friendly countries were also expected in the coming days. He said the world financial institutions and journals as well as independent experts were recognising the steps taken by the government for

economic improvement. He said the benefit of improvement would reach the common man.

The information minister said the cabinet decided to write a letter to the four provinces to enhance their wheat procurement targets and set a good price for the commodity.

He said the Ministry of National Food Security would write to the provinces, saying the decision would bring prosperity to farmers. He pointed out the country had abundant stocks of wheat and a bumper wheat crop was expected this year, and situation would have a positive impact on the rural economy. The cabinet directed the Ministry of National Food Security to ask the provinces to achieve targets for procurement of wheat from farmers. “We will take all possible measures to repay hard work of farmers,” he promised.

The federal cabinet approved the establishment of Institute of Modern Sciences in Wah Cantonment area. The PM ordered to form a committee under Federal Minister for Education and Professional Training to further improve the procedure for establishing new universities and higher education institutions.

The cabinet accorded approval to Federal Public Private Policy of Pakistan 2023-2028. The PM said economic growth could be accelerated through public-private partnership and directed all ministries to submit their proposals under the Public Private Partnership.

The federal cabinet also approved signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Qatar’s Ministry of Labour and Pakistan’s Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development for labour relations, inspections, professional safety and health. The cabinet was told that currently 300,000 Pakistanis are working in Qatar.

The cabinet, on the recommendation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, allowed former ambassador Manzoor Ahmad Chaudhry to receive the Commandeur de l’Ordre National Award from the Government of Cote D’Ivoire in recognition of his services.

On the recommendation of the Ministry of Law and Justice, the cabinet meeting gave its approval for conversion of Accountability Court-VIII Karachi to Special Court (Customs, Taxation and Anti-Smuggling-II), Accountability Court-III Hyderabad to Banking Court Mirpur Khas, Accountability Court-III Sukkur to Banking Court, Ghotki and Accountability Court-IV Sukkur to Banking Court Shaheed Benazirabad.

The cabinet meeting also gave its approval for authorising the Special Court II (Anti-Terrorism) to hear cases reported under the Official Secrets Act, 1923. The Special Court II was given the authority in view of proceeding of the Special Court-I judge on leave.

The minister said the opposition’s first public meeting turned out to be a big failure as they have no issue on which they could speak. Without naming Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), he said there were differences between leaders and they give contradictory statements

outside the prison. "Their leaders are facing corruption cases and are in jail on corruption charges, and I will advise them to focus on those cases," he said.

He said the economy was on a positive trajectory and the process would be taken forward for progress and development of the country and the opposition should also support the government in its endeavours. To a question, he said that no discussion was held on the Faizabad Commission report in cabinet meeting, saying the law minister could give a better response on the issue. Tarar, to a question regarding delay in completion of cases of May 9 accused, said the law was taking its course as there was process of trial and recording evidence. "We hope that all cases will come to a logical end as courts are holding trial of the accused," he added.

With regard to criticism of PMLN policies by Mian Javed Latif and Rana Sanaullah, the information minister said there was freedom of expression in the party. However, he said that party policies should be discussed before camera and criticism of policies should be carried out off-camera. At the same time, he said he did not take controversial statements of Mian Javed Latif seriously. Meanwhile, Saudi Assistant Defence Minister Major General Engineer Talal bin Abdullah arrived in Islamabad on Wednesday to give final shape to mutual security agreements. He was warmly received by the defence authorities.

The Saudi minister would hold a meeting with Army Chief General Asim Munir. A variety of defence related issues would be discussed, including military training between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. It would also be discussed to broaden mutual defence relations even further.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 17-4-2024

Action plan to bolster foreign investment

Measures rolled out to enhance reform and opening-up efforts

By Wang Keju

China has taken pragmatic measures to expand market access, facilitate the flow of talent and scientific research resources, and align with international economic and trade rules as part of the country's efforts to create a favorable business environment and further open up its economy to global investors, officials and experts said.

Though the downward pressure on the world economy continues to mount and the global outlook for cross-border investments appears less optimistic, China's steady economic growth, expanding consumer market and continuous efforts to improve its business climate have positioned it favorably in the global investment landscape, they added.

They made the comments after the State Council, China's Cabinet, rolled out an action plan outlining a

series of measures aimed at bolstering the country's international openness and attracting increased foreign investment in mid-March.

While China has achieved significant milestones and has become a global manufacturing powerhouse over the years thanks to its reform and opening-up policy, the emphasis on attracting and utilizing foreign investment still remains crucial.

"The recent release of the action plan once again highlights China's high regard for attracting foreign investment and its commitment to strengthening beneficial interactions with the global economy through high-level opening-up," said Wu Hao, secretary-general of the National Development and Reform Commission, China's top economic regulator.

The plan, accompanied by concrete actions, aims to enhance the confidence of overseas investors and foster increased investment in China, Wu added.

Despite accounting for only 3 percent of the total number of enterprises in China, statistics from the Ministry of Commerce showed that foreign-invested enterprises have made significant contributions to the country's economy. They are responsible for 40 percent of China's foreign trade volume, about one-sixth of its tax revenue and nearly 10 percent of urban employment. The emphasis on attracting and utilizing foreign investment goes beyond financial considerations. Foreign investors bring advanced technologies, managerial expertise and international networks that contribute to the upgrading of China's industries and the enhancement of its competitiveness in the global market, said Long Guoqiang, vice-president of the State Council's Development Research Center.

Furthermore, the presence of foreign companies introduces new ideas, good practices and higher standards, encouraging domestic firms to improve their efficiency and product offerings. By partnering with foreign companies, China can further improve its production processes, enhance product quality and promote innovation-driven growth, Long said.

The country saw a significant increase in the number of newly established foreign-invested enterprises last year, according to data released by the Ministry of Commerce, with 53,766 companies being set up nationwide, up 39.7 percent year-on-year.

To further leverage the role of foreign investment, expanding market access and increasing the level of liberalization for foreign investment topped the policy measures listed in the action plan. The plan calls for reducing restrictions outlined in the negative list for foreign investment, allowing greater participation of foreign investors in the field of technological innovation through pilot projects, and facilitating the entry of foreign financial institutions into the banking and insurance sectors.

"In addition to market access, the ability to conduct business operations is crucial for foreign financial

institutions," said Zhou Yu, head of the international department of the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank.

Since 2018, China has significantly relaxed market access restrictions in the financial services industry, persuading over 110 foreign financial institutions to expand their operations in China. While ensuring fair competition, China aims to forge an enabling business environment for foreign financial institutions, Zhou said.

For example, the central bank has introduced carbon reduction support tools, taking into account the demands of foreign institutions, and has included 13 foreign banks in the scope of institutions eligible for such tools. The action plan also emphasizes the smooth flow of innovation resources and promotes collaboration between domestic and foreign-funded enterprises.

Specific measures have been in place to facilitate international business personnel exchanges and ease the visa application process for foreign nationals who want to enter China. Notably, the validity period for visas granted to management personnel, technical staff of foreign-invested enterprises, and their spouses and children, has been extended to two years.

Wang Xiaosong, a professor of economics at the Renmin University of China, said that the essence of fostering new quality productive forces lies in innovation-driven growth, and foreign-funded enterprises play a crucial role in introducing innovative elements, including patents, technology and management.

By removing barriers and restrictions and streamlining channels for the flow of innovation resources, China aims to foster a level playing field where both domestic and foreign enterprises have equal access to services and receive equal treatment, and it encourages the exchange of ideas and knowledge to stimulate technological advancements and create a vibrant atmosphere of creativity and entrepreneurship, Wang added.

Meanwhile, facilitating the exchange of international business personnel is an essential aspect of promoting innovation-driven cooperation between domestic and foreign-funded enterprises.

Since last year, the National Immigration Administration has introduced more than 20 policy measures to attract foreign nationals, providing them with better services to help them enter China and adjust to life in the country.

Jia Tongbin, the head of the administration's foreign management department, highlighted the agency's future plans focusing on attracting talent and promoting investment.

In a bid to remain in step with international economic and trade rules, the country continues to advance its accession into the Comprehensive and Progressive

Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement.

China has taken the initiative to create pilot programs on par with the CPTPP standards in some pilot free trade zones, as well as at the Hainan Free Trade Port. Additionally, a group tasked with facilitating the nation's accession to the DEPA has been established to fully advance negotiations, and China is having in-depth exchanges with member countries.

China has faced challenges in its efforts to attract foreign investment as it navigates a landscape marked by intensified competition from developing nations and emerging economies relaxing investment restrictions, as well as "decoupling" and "de-risking" narratives touted by some Western countries, said Wang Xiaohong, a researcher specializing in cross-border investment at the China Center for International Economic Exchanges in Beijing.

That said, China's stable policy environment and comprehensive industrial system provide a solid foundation for foreign investment, said Xu Hongcai, deputy director of the China Association of Policy Science's Economic Policy Committee.

Moreover, China's position as a global economic powerhouse is underpinned by its vast consumer market and ongoing economic transformation. The country's growing middle class and rising disposable income have fueled demand for high-quality products and services, presenting a significant opportunity for foreign businesses, Xu added.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 16-4-2024 **China's GDP expands by impressive** **5.3% in Q1, well above market** **expectations**

By Global Times

China's GDP grew by 5.3 percent in the first quarter of 2024, well above market expectations as the world's second largest economy has gotten off to a robust start and laid a solid foundation for the economy to achieve the pre-set goal of growing by around 5 percent for the whole year.

The growth rate, underpinned by solid growth in export and robust growth in high-tech industrial output, means China's economy remains the healthiest among major economies, and continue to play a leading role to drive global economic recovery, Chinese analysts said.

The data, significantly higher than the average forecast of 4.6 percent by economists polled by Reuters, reflected the resilience of the Chinese economy and the attractiveness of its vast consumer market and manufacturing goods, which also offers a strong rebuttal of some Western media's narrative of Chinese economy reaching its peak, they said.

Retail sales grew 4.7 percent year-on-year to 12.03 trillion yuan (\$1.66 trillion) in the first quarter, while

industrial added-value was up 6.1 percent, and fixed-asset investment rose by 4.5 percent to 10 trillion yuan, according to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on Tuesday.

Unemployment rate was 5.2 percent in March, a 0.1 percentage point drop from a month earlier, the official data showed.

China's economy made a good start with positive factors amassing, laying a strong foundation for achieving the annual development targets, deputy head of NBS Sheng Laiyun said at State Council Information Office press conference on Tuesday.

At the next stage, China will actively cultivate and develop new quality productive forces and strengthen the implementation of the government's macro policies, and continue to effectively pursue high-quality economic growth and appropriately increase economic output, he said.

The data came as the growth of industrial output and consumption slowed down in March with the disappearance of stimulus from holiday spending and low base effect, indicated the solid overall growth of the Chinese economy in the quarter, analysts said.

Quarter over quarter, economy grew 1.6 percent in the first quarter, faster than an expected 1.4-percent growth by market analysts.

The GDP growth in the first quarter was within market expectation and reflects that the world's second-largest economy is setting off a positive start, Tian Yun, a veteran economist based in Beijing, told the Global Times.

"Growth in the supply side has been sustaining the recovery momentum, especially in high value-added industries which are representatives of the new quality productive forces," Tian said. He added that the first-quarter foreign trade data also displayed a palpable turnaround from last year's flat performance, reflecting a recovery in global demand that is set to drive industrial growth this year.

In March alone, retail sales increased 3.1 percent, narrowing down from a 5.5 percent growth on February. Industrial value-added rose 4.5 percent, slowing down from a reading of 7-percent recorded in January-February period.

Fixed-asset investment went up 4.5 percent in the first three months, compared with a 4.2 percent increase in the January-February period, data from NBS showed.

The investment reading also sent a positive sign, even as new construction projects were suffering a two-digit decline in the first quarter amid an ongoing adjustment in the property sector, Tian noted.

Sun Chuanwang, a professor at Xiamen University, told the Global Times on Tuesday that growth was fueled by strong momentum in equipment manufacturing, high-tech industries and pick-up in consumption, including tourism sectors, and "the shift toward high-quality development is characteristic for the quarter."

Looking forward, Tian noted that considering the high base of last year's second quarter, more supportive measures are needed to consolidate the recovery momentum so that the GDP could hit the annual goal of expanding at around 5 percent this year.

The several key factors that determine this year's economic prospects, including a sustained rebound in foreign trade and an end to structural adjustment in the property sector, according to Tian, and those are areas which Chinese policymakers should double down their efforts.

"China, with its huge market of 1.4 billion consumers and a 400 million strong middle class, and the broadest arrays of industries, will be the indisputable anchor of stability for the global economy amid the current complex situation," Cao Heping, an economist at Peking University, told the Global Times, noting that China's industry capacity is far stronger to the global economy than the 36 developed economies combined with their 1-billion-people market.

Analysts pointed out that the Chinese economy faces the issue of subdued consumer confidence, a correction in the property sector and weak private sector investment but the country's high levels of household savings, ample policy space are all at healthy levels allowing more time for policymakers to further repair the impact of COVID-19 on consumption.

China's total imports and exports expanded to reach 10.17 trillion yuan in the first quarter of 2024, according to data released by the General Administration of Customs on Friday. The growth, at 5 percent year-on-year, was at the fastest pace in six quarters.

Since the beginning of 2024, China strengthened efforts to boost consumption by promoting equipment upgrades and consumer goods trade-ins, as well as accelerating the development of new quality productive forces and AI plus initiatives.

The nation also accelerated its pace of opening-up, with the announcement of the 24-point measures to stabilize foreign investment and a range of visa exemption policies to facilitate business travel.

Amid a growing number of signs of strong recovery momentum in the Chinese economy, some major international financial institutions revising up China's GDP projections for the year.

China's official manufacturing PMI, a main gauge of factory activity, stood at 50.8 in March, returning to expansion territory for the first time since September 2023.

Goldman Sachs and Citi recently released separate reports stating that China's economy is off to a good start in 2024. It is expected that the GDP growth target of "around 5 percent" set by the Chinese government can be achieved, and the forecast for China's GDP growth rate for the full year has been raised, according to Xinhua News Agency.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 20-4-2024
Foreign trade set to stay resilient
this year

China's foreign trade, buoyed by the steady upturn of the domestic economy and an improved trading structure increasingly driven by high-tech and green products and export market diversification, will continue to exhibit resilience this year, according to officials and executives on Friday.

That said, weighed down by sluggish external demand, intensifying geopolitical tensions and rising trade protectionism, the growth of the country's foreign trade is not without challenges, they said, calling for more forceful measures to help businesses better navigate the complex international landscape.

"The performance of foreign trade is closely linked to the domestic economy," Guo Tingting, vice-minister of commerce, said at a news conference, adding that the GDP of the world's second-largest economy grew 5.3 percent year-on-year in the first quarter, providing a solid foundation for consolidating the fundamentals of foreign trade.

Moreover, business expectations are consistently improving, as shown by a recent survey conducted by the ministry among over 20,000 exhibitors at the ongoing Canton Fair. The survey revealed that 81.5 percent of the respondents reported an increase or stability in their orders, marking a 16.8-percentage-point increase from the previous session.

Chinese manufacturers have been focusing on developing and exporting products which are technologically advanced, environmentally friendly and possess high added value, fueling the country's efforts to optimize its trading mix, said Li Xingqian, director-general of the ministry's department of foreign trade.

The combined export value of new energy vehicles, lithium batteries and solar products, known as the "new three items", for instance, stood at 1.06 trillion yuan (\$146.39 billion) last year, up 29.9 percent year-on-year. Additionally, industrial robot exports soared by 86.4 percent year-on-year, data from the General Administration of Customs showed.

As the world shifts toward a low-carbon economy, demand has surged for environmentally friendly and sustainable products. The "new three items" have become highly sought-after in the global market, said Xu Yingming, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation.

Through continuous innovation, some Chinese companies have achieved a certain level of technological superiority and product excellence, allowing them to offer high-quality, competitive products that meet international standards and drive their robust export growth, Xu added.

The country's efforts to expand trade relations with a broader range of partners, especially those involving the Belt and Road Initiative, also enhances the resilience of its foreign trade sector.

In 2023, the share of exports to emerging markets rose to 55.3 percent. Trade relations with countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative have also deepened, as evidenced by the first-quarter figures of this year, in which exports to those nations accounted for 46.7 percent of total exports, according to the ministry.

Noting the company's focus on Europe and the United States as the mainstay of its NEV export market, Chen Lide, the regional manager of Asia's Second Division at Zhongtong Bus, said that these markets accounted for more than half of the company's export share last year.

However, there has been a recent surge in inquiries from potential clients in emerging markets, including Africa and South Asia. These untapped markets present significant opportunities for further exploration, Chen added.

Though these favorable conditions will help put China's foreign trade in a better position to sustain sound momentum, various challenges such as geopolitical tensions and trade protectionism will remain tough nuts to crack.

The World Trade Organization said on Wednesday that it expects world merchandise trade volume to increase by 2.6 percent in 2024, 0.7 percentage point lower than the forecast made last October.

The world is witnessing a growing number of geopolitical conflicts, such as the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict with its spillover effects, and the blockage of the Red Sea shipping route, which are causing significant disruption and uncertainties on various fronts, said Guo, the vice-minister of commerce.

In particular, heightened trade protectionism makes it more difficult for Chinese businesses to venture into foreign markets. The recent probes by the European Union and the US into Chinese NEVs, which are based on unfounded allegations, serve as an example.

"It is not a surprise that the US and some developed economies tend to adopt restrictive measures against China in areas where China starts showing growing competitiveness," said Huo Jianguo, vice-chairman of the China Society for World Trade Organization Studies.

"As long as Chinese enterprises act in line with international rules and maintain competitiveness with products which are of high quality and low cost and offer improved customer services, those restrictive measures will only create temporary difficulties and obstacles, but will not stop us from forming a new competitive advantage in those emerging areas."

DEFENCE, NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT, SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND SPACE TECHNOLOGY

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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 19-4-2024

India successfully flight-tests Indigenous Technology Cruise Missile

The flight of the missile was also monitored from the Su-30-Mk-I aircraft of the Indian Air Force

PTI

Balasore (Odisha), India on Thursday successfully flight-tested the Indigenous Technology Cruise Missile (ITCM) from the Integrated Test Range at Chandipur off the coast of Odisha, the DRDO said.

During the test, all subsystems performed as per expectation. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh congratulated DRDO for the successful test flight of the ITCM.

He stated that the successful development of the indigenous long-range subsonic cruise missile powered by indigenous propulsion is a major milestone for Indian defence R&D.

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) said that the performance of the missile was monitored by several Range Sensors such as Radar, Electro Optical Tracking System (EOTS) and Telemetry deployed by the Integrated Test Range at various locations to ensure complete coverage of the flight path. The flight of the missile was also monitored from the Su-30-Mk-I aircraft of the Indian Air Force, they said.

“The missile followed the desired path using waypoint navigation and demonstrated very low altitude sea-skimming flight. This successful flight test has also established the reliable performance of the indigenous propulsion system developed by Gas Turbine Research Establishment (GTRE), Bengaluru,” the DRDO said in a release.

The missile is developed by Bengaluru-based DRDO laboratory Aeronautical Development Establishment along with contributions from other laboratories and Indian industries, it said.

The test was witnessed by many senior scientists from various DRDO laboratories along with the representatives from the production partner.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 29-4-2024

Indian Air Force to use AI-enabled drones for inspecting aircraft engines

According to IAF officers, the present procedures of aero-engine inspection is labour intensive, time consuming and prone to error

Vijay Mohan

Chandigarh, The Indian Air Force (IAF) is developing an artificial intelligence-based drone system to carry out inspection of aircraft engines that would replace the conventional manual methods of carrying out such checks.

The system would consist of high-resolution cameras mounted on a mini or micro drone, imaging software and machine learning algorithms to detect, identify and

classify defects like cracks, corrosion, dents, distortion and damage on external and, to some extent, internal components.

According to IAF officers, the present procedures of aero-engine inspection is labour intensive, time consuming and prone to error. The new system, being developed under the aegis of the Maintenance Command, seeks to overcome the drawbacks of the existing methods.

The drone will be used for fixed-wing aircraft as well as helicopters. Air intake ducts, exhaust nozzles, engine hubs, turbine blades, propellers and rotors are among components that can be inspected by the drone.

Inspection of aero engines is a critical aspect of flight safety and reliability of an aircraft. Besides engines being routinely checked both before and after a flight, the IAF has a structured programme for carrying out inspection and overhaul depending upon the periodicity, flight hours or complaints of malfunction.

The drone will use adjustable cameras to capture high resolution images, which will then be transmitted in real time to engineers and technicians through a wireless link for automated processing, analysis and documentation.

Apart from combat, surveillance and intelligence gathering, the IAF is introducing various types of drones for automating other routine tasks at its bases.

One such project is the use of drones for carrying out daily inspection of runways and dispersal bays for any damage or the presence of foreign objects.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 20-4-2024

India delivers 1st batch of BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to Philippines
HT Correspondent

NEW DELHI: India on Friday delivered the first batch of BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles and launchers to the Philippines, two years after the two countries signed a deal worth almost \$375 million to equip the Philippine Marines with three batteries of the missiles, officials aware of the matter said.

India flew the consignment to the south-east Asian country in an IAF C-17 transport aircraft, the officials said. The January 2022 deal was seen as a shot in the arm for New Delhi’s efforts to emerge as an exporter of major defence hardware.

This is the first export order for the BrahMos missile developed by India and Russia. The deliveries to the Philippines were held up as the two nations hadn’t signed a non-disclosure agreement, HT has learnt.

India has set a defence export target of 35,000 crore by 2024-25.

India’s defence exports grew 32.5% last fiscal and crossed the 21,000-crore mark for the first time as the country remains focussed on boosting the indigenous defence manufacturing ecosystem as well as military exports, the defence ministry said on April 1.

The country is currently exporting military hardware to around 85 countries, with around 100 local firms involved. It includes missiles, artillery guns, rockets, armoured vehicles, offshore patrol vessels, personal protective gear, a variety of radars, surveillance systems and ammunition.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 18-4-2024

India-US jet engine deal is revolutionary, says Defence Secretary Austin

PTI

The India-US deal to jointly produce fighter jet engines for the Indian Air Force is revolutionary, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin has told lawmakers, as he hailed the “great relationship” with India.

The landmark deal was announced last June during the historic Official State Visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the US.

General Electric signed a memorandum of understanding with Hindustan Aeronautics to co-produce F-414 fighter jet engines in India.

According to provisions of the deal, GE Aerospace’s F414 engines will be co-produced in India to power Tejas light combat aircraft Mk2.

Austin told the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Wednesday that the United States has a “great relationship” with India.

“We recently have enabled India to produce a jet weapon, a jet engine in India. And that’s kind of revolutionary. That will provide a great capability to them. We are also co-producing an armoured vehicle with India,” he said.

“So, all of these things, when you add them up, are probably more than we have seen happen in that region in a very, very long time,” Austin said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 25-4-2024

In Russia, NSA Ajit Doval pledges India’s cooperation in countering terrorism

PTI

Moscow, India will continue cooperation for countering misuse of information and communication technologies by terrorists and criminals, NSA Ajit Doval said on Wednesday as he called for international cooperation for an open, stable, secure,

Speaking at a plenary session on Ensuring Information Security in the Polycentric World in St Petersburg, Doval underscored India’s policy to use digital technology for inclusive economic development.

Doval emphasised that India should continue cooperation for countering misuse of information and communication technologies by terrorists and criminals, as also for countering terror funding. In that context, the

UN Convention on cybercrime will be an important initiative at the international level, he said. He called for international cooperation for an open, stable, secure, reliable and inclusive framework for ensuring information security.

Doval, who participated at the XII International Meeting of High Ranking Officials Responsible for Security Matters, said the roadmap for such cooperation should include all stakeholders from governments to private sector, academia, technical communities and civil society, and regular institutional dialogues to help develop common understanding on critical issues.

Capacity building of like-minded nations through training, education, awareness programmes and development of security standards for emerging technologies, and creation of mechanisms for cooperation at domestic and international levels should also be part of such cooperation, he said. He also met his Russian counterpart Nikolai Patrushev for the second time this month, and they reviewed progress in bilateral cooperation and discussed important issues of mutual interest. Doval held a bilateral meeting with Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, on the sidelines of the meeting, which was held in St Petersburg. The Indian Embassy in Moscow said in a post on X, “Both sides reviewed progress in bilateral cooperation and discussed important issues of mutual interest.”

reliable and inclusive framework for ensuring information security.

Reviews bilateral ties

- NSA Ajit Doval met his Russian counterpart Nikolai Patrushev for the second time this month
- They reviewed progress in bilateral cooperation and discussed important issues of mutual interest
- Doval had condemned the barbaric terror attack at Crocus City Hall in Moscow on March 22 and called for shunning double standards in combating the menace

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 27-4-2024

Germany lifts curbs on sale of small arms to India as ‘exception’

As per diplomatic sources, Germany has permitted the National Security Guard (NSG) to buy spare parts and accessories for MP5 submachine guns in its inventory earlier this month.

By Amrita Nayak Dutta

Germany has recently lifted restrictions on the sale of small arms to India as an exception to the country reflecting the growing strategic and military ties between the two countries, sources privy to the development said Friday.

Germany had earlier put restrictions over the sale of small arms to non-NATO countries. However, the latest

move to provide an exemption to India will pave the way for the sale of small arms from Germany to the Indian military and state police forces.

As per diplomatic sources, Germany has permitted the National Security Guard (NSG) to buy spare parts and accessories for MP5 submachine guns in its inventory earlier this month.

It is Heckler & Koch, the German firm, that makes the MP5 submachine guns that are currently in use by the NSG and Indian Navy's marine commandos (MARCOS).

As per sources, Germany has also significantly eased its export licensing rules thus sanctioning several Indian requests over the last month. Earlier, too, 95 per cent of Indian requests — except for small arms — were cleared, but the process was time consuming, prompting Germany to ease the process.

Talking about growing ties between India and Germany as strategic and like-minded partners, the sources spoke about the focus on the freedom of navigation in international waters, the right of passage and other maritime rights and obligations in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and other principles of international law and commonality in foreign policy objectives. One diplomatic source also spoke about the increased engagement between the Indian and the German military, citing examples of the scheduled multinational air exercise Tarang Shakti in August this year wherein the German Air Force, for the first time, will be participating in large numbers with several fighter jets and will also display the A-400M transport aircraft made by aircraft manufacturer Airbus.

The Indian Air Force is looking for Medium Transport Aircraft (MTA) with a carrying capacity of 18 to 30 tonnes as a replacement for its AN-32s, eliciting interest from several global manufacturers.

Additionally, in October end, two ships from Germany—likely a frigate and a tanker—will visit India as part of a larger deployment and will participate in some sea manoeuvres with the Indian Navy.

Germany is also in talks with India over providing engines for India's future light tanks programme. This is, however, at an initial stage and is under consideration.

On the sale of six advanced conventional submarines to India for the Navy's P-75I procurement programme for submarines, sources said a proposal for a government-to-government agreement between India and Germany is being examined. Earlier this month, an Indian Navy team visited Germany to inspect the Air Independent Propulsion System (AIP), offered by Germany. The team will inspect the AIP system of Spanish Navantia, which is also another contender for the submarine programme.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 19-4-2024

Army Chief witnesses India-Uzbekistan drill

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, Army Chief General Manoj Pande today witnessed India-Uzbekistan joint military exercise 'Dustlik' at Termez, Uzbekistan.

General Pande is on a four-day visit (April 15-18) to Uzbekistan. Two Uzbek dignitaries — Deputy Minister of Defence for Combat Training and the Chief of Southern Operations Command — accompanied the Army Chief. He was briefed by the contingent commanders about the exercise plan. Post briefing, General Pande witnessed the training activities. The Army Chief addressed and interacted with the troops of both nations and appreciated their joint efforts. The Army Chief talked about the importance of the growing partnership between the two countries and the armed forces.

'Dustlik' aims to foster military cooperation and enhance combined capabilities to execute operations in mountainous as well as semi-urban terrains. It would focus on high degree of physical fitness, joint planning, joint tactical drills and basics of special arms skills.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 21-4-2024

Navy carries out mega drill on eastern coast

The Navy on Saturday said it carried out an extensive exercise along the eastern coast as part of efforts to check its preparedness to meet any maritime security challenges

The exercise, 'Poorvi Leher', witnessed participation of ships, submarines, aircraft and special naval forces. TNS

Steel-cutting ceremony of cadet training ship held

New Delhi: The steel-cutting ceremony of a cadet training ship was held at a shipyard in Tamil Nadu's Kattupalli on Saturday, officials said. The ceremony was presided over by Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane, according to a statement shared by a Navy spokesperson. TNS

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 19-4-2024

Our duty to defend motherland

Army Chief tells seminar

Diplomatic Correspondent

Speakers and discussants at a seminar on Thursday said that defence diplomacy has emerged as an effective diplomatic instrument and mechanism for crisis prevention to further a country's diplomatic ties, vis-à-vis promoting its foreign and security policy objectives. They said from Bangladesh's perspective, defence diplomacy is regarded as an important mechanism for using armed forces in a non-coercive manner that helps

attain the country's national interests and foreign policy goals.

Taking part in the discussion, Chief of Army Staff General S M Shafiuddin Ahmed said Bangladesh Army is doing everything to contribute to achieving Bangladesh's foreign policy and helping the country become a Sonar Bangla as dreamt by Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. "It is our duty to defend our motherland, maintain sovereignty of the country, and we remain prepared for that. We are doing everything," he said at a seminar on "Defence Diplomacy: Strategy for Bangladesh" hosted by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) at its auditorium.

Talking about military diplomacy, he said they need to enhance capability by putting in more resources and budget. "We know how to do it, but we should have the capability to do it." Regarding the Myanmar issue, the army chief said some military leaders in Myanmar are facing international sanctions, and there is a risk of putting themselves in trouble. "To make one friend happy, we cannot antagonize another. There are dynamics that we have to look into. Practical connotation has also been taken into consideration. We are doing our best, and we are on the right track," he said. "Diplomacy is nothing but an effort to achieve national interest in any form," said the army chief, emphasizing sustained economic growth while maintaining national security. He mentioned how the army, in aid to civil power, is involved in nation-building activities, disaster management efforts at home and abroad, and internal security duties.

The army chief said wherever there is an opportunity, whether it is told or untold, they take the opportunity and do everything for the benefit of Bangladesh. General Shafiuddin said they have indigenously produced some remotely operated vehicles which are good innovations for the Bangladesh Army. "Thus, we are saving a lot of foreign currency as earlier we needed to import these equipment."

He said military personnel not only learn how to fight a war but also know how to prevent or avoid any war to achieve national interest. "We are on the right track, and we will not be failing in discharging our duties."

At the same time, General Shafiuddin said they never forget the main role of military forces, which is to protect the sovereignty of the country, and they should be ready to do that.

He said intention can change overnight, but capability does not change overnight. "You are my friend today, but what happens if you are not my friend tomorrow? We should be capable of defending our national interest, our motherland, but the main foreign policy dictum sets the tone for us." Mentioning Bangabandhu's foreign policy dictum "Friendship to all, malice towards none," he said they are doing everything to implement this foreign policy.

Meanwhile, the speakers mentioned that participation in the United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping missions - a form of defence diplomacy - is an avenue for Bangladesh to demonstrate its commitment to global peace and stability as well as enhance its importance and influence worldwide.

BISS Chairman Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker and its Director-General Major General Md Abu Bakar Siddique Khan, among others, spoke. Dr. ASM Ali Ashraf, Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, spoke on "Evolving Notion of Defence Diplomacy and its Role in Achieving Foreign Policy Goals"; ASM Tarek Hassan Semul, Research Fellow, BISS, talked about "Growing Geopolitical Competition: Challenges and Opportunities of Defence Diplomacy for Bangladesh"; Major General (Retd) Main Ullah Chowdhury, former Deputy Force Commander, United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and A/FC, United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), discussed "Defence Diplomacy in United Nations and Other Overseas Missions: Horizon to Explore"; and Air Vice Marshal (Retd) Mahmud Hussain, Distinguished Expert, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Aviation and Aerospace University (BSMRAAU), and former Ambassador, Brunei, made a presentation on "Existing Practices of Defence Diplomacy and Future Directions: The Case of Bangladesh."

During the open discussion, the speakers mentioned that the concept and appeal of defence diplomacy are evolving in the diplomatic arena of Bangladesh.

Senior officials from different ministries, high officials from embassies and high commissions, former diplomats, senior civil and military officials, media, academia, researchers, faculties, and students from various universities, and representatives from international organizations participated in the seminar and enriched it by presenting their valuable questions, opinions, comments, suggestions, and observations during the open discussion session.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 28-4-2024

Australia and Sri Lanka launch joint maritime security operation

Australia and Sri Lanka's commitment to countering maritime security threats has been on display with the launch of a new joint maritime security operation in Colombo on Monday.

Aptly named Disi Rela, which means 'keeping a watchful eye over the maritime environment,' the new joint activity will see the Australian Border Force (ABF) and Department of Sri Lanka Coast Guard (SLCG) undertake a week-long program of work, from Dikkowita to Chilaw.

Commander Joint Agency Task Force Operation Sovereign Borders, Rear Admiral Brett Sonter said that

Disi Rela underscores the strong partnership between the two countries.

Rear Admiral Sonter said, “We often refer to the Australian-Sri Lankan relationship as gold standard. Today’s launch of Disi Rela takes it to a platinum level. I am looking forward to the opportunities it presents to our countries with regards to countering maritime security threats.”

Disi Rela involves the sharing of operational capabilities and information between the ABF and SLCG, including raising community awareness about people smuggling, human trafficking, and other maritime crime types. Director-General of Department of Sri Lanka Coast Guard, Rear Admiral Pujitha Vithana said that Disi Rela provides a platform to build stronger community awareness about maritime security threats.

Rear Admiral Vithana said, “As the name Disi Rela suggests, it is everyone’s responsibility to keep a watchful eye over our maritime environment. In other words, Sri Lankans from all levels of society have an important role to play.”

The community can report any suspicious or illegal maritime activities that occur anonymously through a dedicated hotline, 041 750 1400, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“We are proud to be working alongside Sri Lanka Coast Guard as we work together to face shared challenges and achieve our shared goals. Disi Rela is proof that the Australian and Sri Lankan relationship continues to grow from strength to strength,” Rear Admiral Sonter added.

THE ISLAND, COLOMBO 29-4-2024

US, SL conclude naval exercise

The Mini Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) bilateral exercise 2024 between the United States Pacific Fleet and the SL Navy commenced on April 22 and was held at the Marine Headquarters, Special Boat Squadron Headquarters, Naval Dockyard and Upparu in Trincomalee as well as certain segments at the Lighthouse Galley in Colombo.

The closing ceremony of the bilateral exercise was held at the Marines Headquarters in Sampoor, under the auspices of Commander Sean Jin, Office of Defence Cooperation at the US Embassy in Colombo and Captain Upul Samarakoon, Acting Director Sri Lanka Navy Marines. Mementoes were also exchanged, signifying the importance of this occasion.

During the Force Protection exercise in CARAT, activities included rescuing hostages, handling arrested individuals, tracking, weapon handling, showcasing native plants of Sri Lanka, handling snakes, conducting exercises with Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (SUAS), Explosive Ordnance Disposal exercises (EOD), and firing exercises.

On the side lines of Mini CARAT – 2024, a seminar on Women, Peace and Security was also held at the Lighthouse Galley in Colombo.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 28-4-2024

Iran at the peak of drone, missile capabilities: Atlantic Council

TEHRAN- The Atlantic Council think tank expressed astonishment at Iran’s drone and missile capabilities, stating that Tehran has compensated for its deficiencies and shortcomings in its aviation industry through the development of such weapons.

The Atlantic Council think tank analyzed Iran’s military response last week, stating that Iran was once weak in the field of military aviation industry but has made significant progress and is now at its peak.

The unprecedented April 13th attack by Iran on Israel was a warning shot. This response demonstrates that despite not having a modern air force, Tehran has the potential to strike Israel and counter its air superiority.

The American think tank emphasized that Iran’s direct aerial attack on Israeli soil was a turning point in the region’s security situation.

While the recent attack did not reveal anything new about Iran’s military capabilities, it showed Iran’s dangerous capabilities in exploiting Israel’s lack of strategic depth.

The report stipulated that Iran’s attack makes Israel reconsider its calculations about Iran. Some foreign policy analysts described Iran’s response to Israel’s attack on the consulate in Damascus as having negative repercussions for Tehran, but the Islamic Republic and its Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei viewed it from a different perspective.

The author of the report repeats claims by Zionist media about Western cooperation with Israel in countering Iran’s missiles and drones, stating that Iran’s attack did not cause significant infrastructure damage. However, the Atlantic Council acknowledges that if three thousand or thirty thousand missiles and drones were launched towards Israel without prior warning, it would be very difficult to counter them.

Meanwhile, it is said that Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran’s main staunch ally, has a stockpile of 150,000 rockets and missiles.

The report also said that Iran considers itself surrounded by enemies and threats, some of an existential caliber. When backed into what it perceives as a corner, as it was after the United Nations refused to condemn the attack on its Damascus embassy, it almost always favors escalation over compromise, provoking fear and uncertainty over conventional diplomacy.

The American research center considers the air force as Iran’s Achilles’ heel in terms of security since the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and states that after that war, Iran sought to strengthen its air capabilities and invested a

significant portion of its resources in developing ballistic missile and combat drone programs.

Due to years of restrictions on its armaments by the United Nations, Iran continuously tried to increase the range and accuracy of its missiles and combat drones, successfully elevating its missile and drone capabilities to this high level.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 29-4-2024

The possibility of a change in Iran's nuclear doctrine

By Xavier Villar

TEHRAN- Hours before the Israeli "response" sending a couple of drones that were intercepted in Isfahan, the commander in charge of protecting the country's nuclear facilities, Ahmad Haqtaalab, sent a message to the Zionist Entity stating that if it intended to attack any of the country's nuclear installations, this action could force a change in Iran's nuclear strategic doctrine.

In this regard, it should be noted that for the Islamic Republic, the nuclear issue is constrained by the fatwa - an Islamic decree- issued in 2003 by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the current Leader of the country. This fatwa clearly prohibits the production and use of nuclear and biological weapons. Several representatives of the Islamic Republic have made it clear that if the country has not developed nuclear weapons, it is not due to a lack of technical and scientific competence, but rather because of the explicit prohibition of the fatwa. Its importance is such that in 2021, the then Minister of Intelligence, Mahmoud Alavi, faced harsh criticism from renowned Islamic jurists for suggesting that the country should possess nuclear weapons to defend itself if cornered. From a legal-political perspective, therefore, the nuclear issue is limited to a civilian nuclear program. This does not mean that there is not a growing public opinion that believes the country should possess nuclear weapons as a measure of protection against Western threats. But as long as the fatwa is in effect, the debate is framed within its parameters.

Haqtaalab's statements, while staying within the official doctrine expressed by the Leader's fatwa, are important for two reasons. Firstly, because they come from the mouth of a high-ranking military official, and secondly, because they demonstrate a level of public discourse that many people considered absent in the Islamic Republic.

As mentioned earlier, in the days following Operation "True Promise," various types of responses were considered by the Zionist Entity, including the possibility of attacking one of the Islamic Republic's nuclear facilities. In that scenario, the country could have accelerated uranium enrichment and thus come close to the possibility of actual and effective nuclearization.

It is worth remembering that although Iran has reduced its levels of uranium enrichment (as confirmed by the

International Atomic Energy Agency), the country still has significant reserves of radioactive material (estimates suggest that the Islamic Republic possesses close to 5,500 kilograms of uranium).

All of the above, along with the new phase characterized by active deterrence in which Iran finds itself, could mean that the United States, Israel, and to a lesser extent the European Union, pay even more attention to the Islamic Republic's nuclear program with the aim of preventing possible nuclearization.

Several Iranian analysts believe that the current nuclear strategy may be modified depending on how the authorities responsible for the nuclear dossier react to three issues:

- Firstly, the attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus can be seen as a clear manifestation that the Zionist Entity has decided to cross all red lines, and there is no guarantee that it will not do so again. It is precisely this view that would explain the change in the Islamic Republic's political-military strategy in its policy toward Israel: from the traditional doctrine of strategic patience to the new doctrine represented by active deterrence.

- Secondly, Iran's response to the attack in Damascus, the well-known Operation "True Promise," may increase the perception, for the United States and Israel, that Iran has become an even greater "threat," and therefore, greater pressure will be deemed necessary to be applied to the Islamic Republic.

- Lastly, although the Israeli response was a failure in military terms, the attempted attack in the province of Isfahan, where one of the country's most important nuclear plants is located, could lead Iranian political and military leaders to consider increasing their deterrence capabilities to prevent future attacks against their nuclear facilities.

It cannot be forgotten that the current phase of the conflict, characterized by a much more assertive attitude from Iran in responding to Zionist provocations, may be a lasting phase. In this regard, the Islamic Republic will have to increase its deterrence capabilities to avoid becoming the target of Israeli attacks. One of the possibilities Iran has on the table in case it needs to enhance its deterrence capacity is to resume uranium enrichment, which would ensure the continuation of avoiding an open conflict in the region while sending a clear message to Israel and the United States about Iran's unwillingness to submit. Some suggest that Haqtaalab's words should be interpreted in this context. The possibility of a change in Iran's nuclear doctrine would entail a nuclear reorganization in the region that must also be taken into account. In this sense, both Saudi Arabia and Turkey could develop their nuclear capabilities, and the Zionist Entity could publicly acknowledge what is an open secret: the existence of its nuclear program.

Taking into account all of the above, the Iranian nuclear program, which for the moment remains within the civilian limits imposed by Ayatollah Khamenei's fatwa issued in 2003, must be analyzed within a context that considers both the internal and external particularities of the current geopolitical situation. Any change in it should be analyzed based on the discursive principles upon which the Islamic Republic is founded, especially those that guarantee Iran's independence and autonomy. This was evident in the recent negotiations with the West to try to revive the nuclear agreement that was unilaterally dissolved by the United States. During those negotiations, the Islamic Republic, through its negotiating team, sought a fair agreement that would guarantee independence from the West in setting its own terms.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 27-4-2024
Brave Peacekeepers

The canvas of United Nations Peacekeeping is incomplete without Pakistan's name on it. One of the largest contributors of troops and police to the UN Peacekeeping missions, Pakistan has been steadfast even when many other countries pulled back. It is time Pakistan's peacekeepers take their leave from their twenty-one years-long service in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This is a very proud moment for the entire country as the blue helmets carry on top of their heads the soft, peace-loving image of the nation. It goes without saying that the major role Pakistani troops took up in the DRC, that of protection of civilians, aligns with the nation's values of helping the vulnerable.

Stationed mostly in the African Continent, UN Peacekeeping Missions are a tough and challenging endeavour. Harsh weather, complex infights, armed uprisings, and dangerous diseases did not deter Pakistani men and women from saving people affected by conflict. DRC was a tough mission where Pakistan lost the highest number of its peacekeepers, 31. However, as the blue helmets come back home, a warm welcome will honour the sacrifice of the thirty-one who gave up their lives in the line of duty. Accomplishments are many during Pakistan's stay in DRC.

Apart from the countless human stories the troops and personnel will carry with them, helping the DRC forces to stop an armed uprising from taking over the city of Uvira will stand out. Undoubtedly, the human side of the men and women in uniform will stick in the hearts of the local population for years to come. Pakistan's troops have been part of 46 UN missions in 29 countries, out of which currently seven missions are ongoing. DRC is particularly significant because as many as 100000 Pakistani peacekeepers served here.

The longest and the largest, now that it comes to an end, the country and the people must raise this achievement at every forum possible. All sorts of praise and awards

by the government must go to the troops coming back home. The UN Peacekeeping footprint of Pakistan does not usually get the due attention and applause. It is on every Pakistani to highlight this softer side of their country. Military and police prowess on one end, the consistency and spirit are just as praiseworthy.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 20-4-2024
**PLA sets up information support force,
 to advance Chinese military's
 competitiveness in modern warfare**

By Global Times

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has set up an information support force and Chinese President Xi Jinping presented a flag to the force at its establishment ceremony on Friday in Beijing.

Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), stressed solid efforts to build a strong and modernized information support force.

Xi said that the establishment of the information support force is a major decision that the CPC Central Committee and the CMC have made in light of the overall need for building a strong military. Xi stressed that the information support force is a new, strategic branch of the military and a key pillar in coordinating the construction and application of the network information system. It will play a crucial role in advancing the Chinese military's high-quality development and competitiveness in modern warfare. Establishing the information support force is of profound and far-reaching significance for the modernization of national defense and the armed forces as well as effective fulfillment of the missions and tasks of the military in the new era, Wu Qian, a spokesperson for the Ministry of National Defense, told a press conference on Friday.

It is a brand-new strategic arm of the PLA and a key underpinning of coordinated development and application of the network information system, which plays an important role and bears great responsibility in promoting high-quality development and the ability to fight and win in modern warfare, Wu said. With the latest reform, the PLA now has a new system of services and arms under the leadership and command of the CMC, Wu said.

There are four services, namely the Army, the Navy, the Air Force and the Rocket Force, and four arms – the Aerospace Force, the Cyberspace Force, the Information Support Force and the Joint Logistics Support Force – Wu noted. As circumstances and tasks evolve, China will continue to refine the modern military force structure with Chinese characteristics, the spokesperson said. In terms of the task that the Aerospace Force undertakes, Wu said China's space policy is clear. "We

are committed to peaceful utilization of space and stand ready to work with all countries with the same commitment to strengthen exchanges, deepen cooperation and contribute to lasting peace and common security in space," he said.

Xi also urged efforts to build a network information system that fulfills the requirements of modern warfare and features the Chinese military's own characteristics, as well as efforts to accelerate the development of integrated combat capabilities more effectively.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 20-4-2024

Using Chinese-made ships as targets for military exercises is a ridiculous stunt by Philippines

By Global Times

The "Balikatan" or "shoulder-to-shoulder" military drills between the Philippines and the US haven't even started, but a clumsy political performance has taken the stage ahead of time. The Philippine military first publicly announced that in the "sinking exercise" segment, the retired Philippine Navy replenishment tanker "BRP Lake Caliraya" would be selected as the target. This ship was originally manufactured in China and was used by Philippine enterprises as a civilian oil tanker. It is the Philippines' only "Chinese-made naval asset." The Philippine military also firmly stated that this decision was "not intentional" and does not signify any specific country. It also stated that this joint military exercise is not targeting any foreign country, including China. It is a ludicrous performance by Manila.

The "BRP Lake Caliraya," formerly "MT Lapu-Lapu," was an oil tanker built by a Chinese shipyard for the Philippine National Oil Company, and was also a witness to previous cooperation between China and the Philippines. It was later converted by the Philippine Navy into its first-ever replenishment ship. The Philippine side is preparing to use it as a target in a simulated "enemy ship" scenario, showing clear provocative intent. However, they are attempting to cover it up and refuse to acknowledge it, making the farcical claim that it is "not intentional." This approach of trying to have it both ways has turned Manila into a joke in the region and is an example of its opportunistic behavior in the entire South China Sea issue.

It must be pointed out that the nature of this "shoulder-to-shoulder" military exercise is extremely negative. Not only will the scale exceed that of previous years, but the US and the Philippines will also conduct exercises for the first time in disputed areas beyond 12 nautical miles from Philippine territorial waters. The Philippine Coast Guard will deploy six vessels for this exercise for the first time. Additionally, the navies of the Philippines, the US, and France will conduct trilateral joint patrols for the first time. Compared to the staged nature of the "sinking exercise," the several

"firsts" touted by the US and the Philippines pose a substantive threat to regional stability, which should lead regional countries to maintain high vigilance.

In particular, the US is currently making arbitrary demands from the Philippines. The US previously hinted at deploying mid-range missile systems in the "Indo-Pacific region," making it the first time since the end of the Cold War. An article from Singapore-based newspaper Lianhe Zaobao said that external observers have been guessing where the US would deploy the system, as well as "which country would be willing to risk directly offending China," and most commentaries guessed it would be deployed in Guam, or even in Japan - "no one thought it would be the Philippines." Manila seems open to all American allies, even signing new defense cooperation agreements with the EU and the UK. Japan, Canada, and France are also in line to sign the visiting forces agreement with the Philippines. The country has now become a "broken window" in the region and even feels complacent about it. Some foreign media commented that Philippine President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr. is feeding the Philippines a bitter pill coated in sugar. Of course, it is not a bitter pill; it is poison.

Since taking office, Marcos Jr. has not made much progress in the country's economic and social governance, nor has he prioritized addressing the urgent issues of hunger, poverty, drugs, and crime in the Philippines. The latest domestic polls in the Philippines show that Marcos Jr.'s national approval rating and trust in his administration have significantly dropped by 13 and 16 percentage points, respectively, with voices in the House of Representatives calling for his resignation. Marcos Jr. may be hoping to gain some face and support by stirring up trouble in the South China Sea and attracting American support in the realm of diplomacy. However, this approach is not beneficial for Manila in the short or long term. China is the Philippines' largest trading partner, and the power gap between the two countries is evident. What is Manila really after through its repeated provocations?

Perhaps Marcos Jr. is fantasizing about exchanging economic investments with the US by cooperating with it in its competition with China. But, the problem is that the US has been the Philippines' most important ally for the past few decades. If the US really wanted to help the Philippines, would it have waited until today? During the recent US-Japan-Philippines summit, Manila expressed hope that the US and Japan would invest \$100 billion in the Philippines. To outsiders, it seems like the Philippines is demanding support from the US against China, but what it received was a vague promise of "stimulating \$100 billion in investment" from the US and Japan. Just from this one detail, it is clear that the Philippines cannot possibly obtain the benefits it desires by cooperating with Washington, let alone solve its increasingly serious domestic development issues.

The current situation in the South China Sea is generally stable, but the US and the Philippines are constantly causing trouble, trying to drag down and consume China. China will never fall for it.

From China's attitude in the past few months, it can be seen that we have left room and flexibility for the Philippines on the South China Sea issue, in the hope that the current disputes can be resolved through communication, negotiation, and dialogue. However, whether it is at Ren'ai Jiao, Huangyan Dao, or other reefs and islands, the Philippines is still acting unilaterally. We hope that the Philippines will not allow the "spiritual victory" of sinking target ships to make them too excited, leading to the illusion that they can take on real ships. China's restraint is not unlimited, and if the Philippines and external forces cross the bottom line and red line of peace and stability in the South China Sea, China will definitely take action when necessary, which is something the Philippines cannot afford.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 26-4-2024

Shenzhou-18 successfully launched, sending three taikonauts, fish to Chinese space station

By Fan Anqi in Jiuquan

With the thunderous roar, the Shenzhou-18 manned spacecraft blasted off from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in Northwest China, atop the Long March-2F Y18 carrier rocket on 8:59 pm on Thursday, carrying taikonauts Ye Guangfu, Li Cong and Li Guangsu as well as nearly 100 experimental projects to the Tiangong space station.

Following a smooth 10-minute flight, the Shenzhou-18 spacecraft successfully entered its planned orbit, as confirmed by a statement the China Manned Space Agency (CMSA) sent to the Global Times.

After entering its orbit, the Shenzhou-18 spacecraft adopted an autonomous rapid rendezvous, successfully docking with the Tianhe core module's radial docking port approximately 6.5 hours post-launch. This marked the formation of a three-ship, three-module complex.

Radial docking is a critical part of this mission. Compared to the more familiar forward and backward rendezvous and docking tasks, radial docking is "more like a complex action movie," officials with the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp (CASC), China's leading space contractor, told the Global Times on Thursday.

"The hundred-ton class assembly of the space station could obstruct the spacecraft's measurement sensors, and there will be mutual impact of plumes from the station's engines... These will all pose significant challenges for radial docking. To eliminate the risks, we have minimized performance parameter deviations at each stage and verified that the docking mechanism has the capture and buffer capability under 31 complex conditions," the CASC said in a statement. The Shenzhou-18 manned spacecraft is the second in the space station's application and development phase to implement radial docking. Prior to this mission, Shenzhou-16 had already successfully completed radial docking with the Chinese space station on May 30, 2023.

The current radial docking will further mark the maturity of China's independently developed space rendezvous and docking GNC (Guidance, Navigation, and Control) technology, said CNSA in its statement.

As manned missions to Tiangong have become normalized, more than 90 experiments are scheduled to be carried out in and outside of the space station during Shenzhou-18's six-month stay. These experiments include various fields such as microgravity basic physics, space materials science, space life science, aerospace medicine, and aerospace technology, CMSA spokesperson Lin Xiqiang said Wednesday while detailing the mission one day prior to the launch.

'The fourth crew member'

One of the highlights for this trip is the adventure of the very first fish, which has been dubbed adorably by Chinese netizens as "the fourth crew member of Shenzhou-18."

Using zebrafish and hornwort, "the experiment will be China's first in-orbit aquatic ecological research project, which aims to make a breakthrough in the cultivation of vertebrates in space," Lin said.

"In the broader picture, this ecosystem could potentially serve as a model for creating new ecological environments in space, including food ecosystems. On a smaller scale, the microgravity and radiation effects of space, if prolonged, are still unknown in terms of their impact on the members of the mini ecosystem and the material and energy cycles within the new ecosystem, which can provide new insights to our understanding toward space," Cang Huaixing, a research fellow at the Technology and Engineering Center for Space Utilization, Chinese Academy of Sciences, told the Global Times.

"Additionally, our device is equipped with a CCD for photography and video recording, enabling and facilitating behavioral studies of the fish," Cang said. "In fact, my observations in recent days have been

surprising. The behavior of the fish is much more complex than we had previously imagined."

The selection of the fortunate "fourth member" is not just because zebrafish are beautiful, but also because they are well-known "model organisms" in the scientific community.

They have advantages such as small size, short development cycle, and short experimental period. What's more, zebrafish eggs are transparent, making it easy for researchers to observe the process of embryonic development.

More importantly, zebrafish share 87 percent genetic similarity with humans, making them suitable for studying and revealing universal principles of life forms.

In 2012, Japan had also sent a zebrafish aquarium to the International Space Station to observe the effects of microgravity on osteoblast and osteoclast activity.

Cang told the Global Times that while Japan's research focused on fish as the subject, China's goal is to construct and study an entire ecosystem.

Apart from raising fish, the Shenzhou-18 crew will also conduct the world's first in-orbit stem cell study on the plant's stem tips, to reveal the mechanism of plant evolutionary adaptation to gravity and provide theoretical support for space cropping, the CNSA revealed.

The prevention and damage repair of space debris impact will also be a key task during their stay.

"With human space activities rapidly increasing in recent years, the problem of space debris has become more prominent," Lin said. He noted that they had previously discovered that some of the solar panel cables on the space station were damaged by space debris impacts, leading to a partial loss of power supply capacity.

Building on the existing space debris protection mechanism at the station, the Shenzhou-18 crew will install debris protection reinforcement devices on external pipelines, cables, and key equipment during their extravehicular activities (EVAs). They will also conduct external inspections as needed to further ensure the safety of the space station.

In total, the Shenzhou-18 taikonauts are expected to carry out two to three EVAs and implement six cargo outbound deliveries via the station's cargo airlock module.

Heading to the moon

In February, CNSA revealed that landing Chinese on the moon has become the next priority for the country's space exploration now that the construction of Tiangong has been completed.

With the overall goal of achieving a lunar landing by 2030, research and development of various systems are currently under way as planned. The necessary design work for the Long March-10 carrier rocket, the Mengzhou manned spacecraft, Lanyue lunar lander, and lunar suits have all completed and are now in the process of producing initial samples and conducting various tests.

Additionally, the spacecraft and lander have completed the development of thermal test products, and the rocket is conducting ground tests of engines.

The construction of the Wenchang manned lunar exploration launch site has also been launched. Now, public solicitation of manned lunar vehicles and lunar payload schemes is underway, with competition for selection.

Compared to space station missions, lunar missions require astronauts to master the normal and emergency operations of the Mengzhou spacecraft and Lanyue lunar lander, as well as lunar surface operations such as entering and exiting the cabin, carrying out activities under one-sixth of normal gravity, driving lunar rovers over long distances, and conducting drilling, sampling, and scientific investigations on the moon.

China's fourth round of taikonaut selection will soon be completed. After joining the team, they will work together with incumbent taikonauts to carry out the follow-up missions in the space station and achieve the goal of landing on the moon.

China National Space Administration (CNSA) also revealed more details of international cooperation in its lunar probe programs on the just-ended China Space Day on Wednesday.

The International Lunar Research Station (ILRS,) a lunar program currently led by the CNSA and Russia's Roscosmos, has added Nicaragua, the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO), and the Arab Union for Astronomy and Space Science as collaborating countries and organizations.

China will cooperate with these three parties in various aspects such as engineering implementation, operation and application of the ILRS program, the CNSA said.