
Vol. : XXXIX No. 23

ISSN 0254-7996

Fortnightly Publication of South Asian Press Clippings

Selections From Regional Press

Coverage : December 1 – 15, 2023

INSTITUTE OF REGIONAL STUDIES, ISLAMABAD

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

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

CONTENTS

I.	Foreign Affairs	1
II.	Internal Affairs	19
III.	Economic, Cultural and Social Affairs	37
IV.	Defence, Nuclear Development, Scientific Research and Space Technology	55

FOREIGN AFFAIRS				
	Subject	Newspapers/Periodicals	Date	Page
	INDIA India-Pakistan Relations			
1.	PoK is ours, J&K paid for Nehru's blunders, Art 370 was root cause of terror: Amit Shah in LS By Harikishan Sharma China on 370 Verdict	The Indian Express, New Delhi	7-12-2023	1
2.	Kashmir issue should be resolved through dialogue between India and Pakistan: China - PTI India-Canada Relations	The Tribune, Chandigarh	13-12-2023	2
3.	Canada's PM Justin Trudeau: Went public on Hardeep Singh Nijjar murder to 'put a chill on India' - Tribune News Service	The Tribune, Chandigarh	14-12-2023	2
4.	Nijjar killing: What Amit Shah said after Justin Trudeau's fresh statement - HT News Desk India-US Relations	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	15-12-2023	2
5.	Why US is touching the RAW nerve By Sandeep Dikshit	The Tribune, Chandigarh	10-12-2023	3
6.	'From complicated to dating': US envoy to India on ties between two countries By HT Correspondent India-China Relations	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	7-12-2023	4
7.	India, China hold another WMCC meeting, no sign of breakthrough By Rezaul H Laskar India-Maldives Relations	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	1-12-2023	5
8.	India, Maldives agree to set up 'core group' to sort out differences By Sandeep Dikshit	The Tribune, Chandigarh	3-12-2023	6
9.	After troop removal demand, Maldives says ending pact with India on water survey By Shubhajit Roy India-Qatar Relations	The Indian Express, New Delhi	15-12-2023	6
10.	Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets Qatar's ruler, discusses well-being of Indian community - PTI	The Telegraph, Kolkata	3-12-2023	7
11.	Indian envoy meets 8 ex-Navy men on death row in Qatar - Tribune News Service	The Tribune, Chandigarh	8-12-2023	7

	BANGLADESH			
12.	An increasingly complicated friendship By Zaillur Rahman	The Daily Star, Dhaka	12-12-2023	8
13.	What do they want from Bangladesh? By Rubana Huq SRI LANKA	The Daily Star, Dhaka	13-12-2023	9
14.	Bridge this deficit between India and Sri Lanka By T. Ramakrishnan	Daily News, Colombo	11-12-2023	11
15.	Relations between Sri Lanka and the EU reviewed in Brussels	Daily News, Colombo	5-12-2023	12
16.	Saudi Arabia extends helping hand to develop Sri Lanka's economy NEPAL	Daily News, Colombo	5-12-2023	12
17.	Nepal, China to discuss implementation modality for cross-border power line By Prithvi Man Shrestha	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	11-12-2023	13
18.	Nepal, India review progress of India-funded projects - Post Report IRAN	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	2-12-2023	13
19.	KSA, Iran share same stance on Gaza war	Tehran Times, Tehran	14-12-2023	14
20.	A stepping stone to strategic ties By Leonid Issaev	Tehran Times, Tehran	9-12-2023	15
21.	Iran, China set to cooperate for peace amid Gaza war PAKISTAN	Tehran Times, Tehran	7-12-2023	16
22.	India building 1,000MW hydropower project on Chenab By Khalid Mustafa	The News, Islamabad	4-12-2023	16
23.	COAS discusses security issues with Blinken By Anwar Iqbal CHINA	Dawn, Islamabad	15-12-2023	17
24.	GT Voice: Rubio's call for ban against China- US travel misleading By Global Times	Global Times, China	4-12-2023	18

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 7-12-2023

PoK is ours, J&K paid for Nehru's blunders, Art 370 was root cause of terror: Amit Shah in LS

Harikishan Sharma

Maintaining that Jammu and Kashmir suffered due to the "blunders" of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and that Pakistan-occupied Kashmir "*hamara hai*", Union Home Minister Amit Shah said Wednesday that 45,000 lives were lost due to Article 370 and this was why the Narendra Modi government abrogated it. He said Article 370 was "the root cause" of separatism and terrorism in J&K.

Replying to a discussion in Lok Sabha on the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Amendment) Bill, 2023 and Jammu and Kashmir Reservation (Amendment) Bill, 2023 – the two Bills were passed by a voice vote later – Shah also hit out at the Congress for what he called its opposition to the backward classes.

He said J&K witnessed terrorism after the 1980s. "People who were native residents were displaced. No one cared about them... Those who were responsible for stopping it were enjoying holidays in England. I don't want to name them. Still, they talk about their sacrifice. If they had eliminated terror at that time, neither they (Kashmiri Pandits) would have had to leave nor would I need to bring these Bills," he said.

"When they (Kashmiri Pandits) were displaced, they had to become refugees in their own country... According to data, 46,631 families and 157,967 individuals were displaced within their own country... in such a way that their roots were uprooted... This Bill is to give them rights, representation," he said.

Shah said that Kashmir suffered due to the "blunders" of Nehru. "*Nehru ke samay mei jo blunder hua tha, iske karan Kashmir ko bhugatna pada*. I say this with full responsibility that Kashmir suffered due to two blunders by Nehru... his decisions. First, the ceasefire (with newly created Pakistan) was announced when our forces were winning. When the forces reached the Punjab area, the ceasefire was announced, which led to the birth of Pak-occupied Kashmir. If the ceasefire had happened three days later, PoK would have been part of India today... The ceasefire was announced before winning the whole of Kashmir. The second blunder was to take the Kashmir issue to the United Nations," he said.

As soon as Shah mentioned Nehru, Congress members protested. "Why are you angry with me? I am just reading Nehruji's quote... If they are angry, they should be (angry) with Nehruji."

Discussing delimitation of Assembly constituencies in J&K, Shah said earlier there were 37 seats in Jammu,

now there are 43. Earlier, there were 46 seats in Kashmir, now there are 47 seats, he said.

"We have reserved 24 seats for PoK... *woh hamara hai, hamne woh reserve rakhi hai* (PoK is ours, so we have reserved the seats)" he said.

Highlighting changes witnessed by J&K following the abrogation of Article 370, Shah said J&K has seen unprecedented transformation ever since the Modi-led government came into power.

"We must not forget that Jammu and Kashmir got its first multiplex cinema under the Modi government only... Now, over 100 films are being shot in the Valley... and bank loan proposals for over 100 movie theatres are under process," he said.

Taking a swipe at Opposition leaders, Shah said, "If you are cut off from the roots, how will you know what changes have happened in Jammu and Kashmir? The transformation in Jammu and Kashmir cannot be felt by enjoying holidays in England."

He said there has been a 70 per cent reduction in terror incidents during the NDA rule from 2014 to 2023. "That is why I was right in saying that the root cause of separatism, the root cause of terrorism was nothing but Article 370." He said 45,000 lives were lost due to Article 370.

During his speech, Shah attacked the Congress for its stand on backward classes.

"Many friends in Congress talk about the backward class, but first look at your history. The biggest opposition to the backward class and the work of stopping the backward class has been done by the Congress. The Backward Classes Commission was not given constitutional recognition for 70 years. The Narendra Modi government gave constitutional recognition to the Backward Classes Commission," he said.

"Narendra Modi is a leader born in a poor family. He understands the pain of the poor and backwards," he said.

Without taking names, Shah took a swipe at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi for his statements on the backward classes.

"*Kuch neta hote hain jinhe haath mei kuch likh kar pakda do toh 6 mahine naya kagaz na aaye toh wahi bolte hain: backward classes, backward classes...* (There are some leaders who keep repeating the same notes for 6 months until they get a new paper)," he said.

When Congress members staged a walkout, Shah said, "Whenever the issue of backward classes comes up, the Congress never cooperates. It leaves."

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 13-12-2023

Kashmir issue should be resolved through dialogue between India and Pakistan: China

'On the Kashmir issue, China's position is consistent and clear'

PTI

Beijing, The Kashmir issue should be resolved through dialogue and consultation between India and Pakistan, said China on Tuesday while reacting to India's Supreme Court judgment on Article 370 upholding the central government's decision on the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir.

"On the Kashmir issue, China's position is consistent and clear," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said, replying to a question by a Pakistani journalist seeking China's reaction on the issue.

India's Supreme Court on Monday unanimously upheld the central government's decision to abrogate provisions of Article 370 bestowing special status to the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. The apex court also directed restoration of statehood "at the earliest" as well as holding elections to the assembly by September 30 next year.

"This is a dispute left from the past between India and Pakistan and it should be properly addressed through peaceful means, according to the UN charter, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions and relevant bilateral agreements," she said.

Relevant parties need to settle the dispute through dialogue and consultations and safeguard peace and stability in the region, Mao said.

Pakistan, China's all-weather ally, on Monday said India's Supreme Court verdict upholding the abrogation of Article 370 has "no legal value", asserting that the international law does not recognise New Delhi's "unilateral and illegal actions" of August 5, 2019.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 14-12-2023

Canada's PM Justin Trudeau: Went public on Hardeep Singh Nijjar murder to 'put a chill on India'

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has said that safety concerns for the Sikh community — and the need to "put a chill on India" — prompted him to go public about a possible role of the Indian government in Hardeep Singh Nijjar's killing.

"Too many Canadians were worried that they were vulnerable. We felt that all the quiet diplomacy and all

the measures that we put in — and ensured that our security services put in to keep people safe in the community — needed a further level of deterrence, perhaps of saying publicly and loudly that we know, or we have credible reasons to believe, that the Indian government was behind this (Nijjar's killing)," he said in an interview to Canadian newspaper Toronto Star.

"And therefore put a chill on them (India) continuing or considering doing anything like this," he said, adding that the Sikh community in British Columbia had been raising concerns shortly after Nijjar was killed.

In September, Trudeau had spoken in the House of Commons of credible intelligence linking India's government to the June 18 murder of Nijjar outside a gurdwara in British Columbia's Surrey. His statement, however, worsened Ottawa's ties with New Delhi that rejected the allegations as absurd.

Trudeau told Toronto Star that he went public after weeks of "quiet diplomacy" including a conversation with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the G20 Summit in New Delhi, where the two leaders met behind closed doors for 16 minutes.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 15-12-2023

Nijjar killing: What Amit Shah said after Justin Trudeau's fresh statement

HT News Desk

Union home minister Amit Shah on Thursday reiterated India's stance on Khalistani separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar's killing and completely rejected Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's allegation of the "potential" involvement of Indian agents in the murder. Amit Shah's statement comes a day after Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that his decision to make allegations in public about a possible Indian government link and the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar was intended to "put a chill" on them from repeating a similar action.

Rejecting the allegations related to the killing of Nijjar on June 18 in Surrey, Shah, during a conclave of news channel Aaj Tak, asked, "What are terrorists wanted in India doing in Canada?"

"We have completely denied these allegations. They (the Canadian government) should also answer what terrorists wanted in India were doing in Canada," Shah said.

The relations between India and Canada came under severe strain following Trudeau's allegations on September 18 of a "potential" involvement of Indian agents in the killing of Nijjar in British Columbia. India had designated Nijjar as a terrorist in 2020.

India rejected Trudeau's allegations as "absurd" and "motivated".

Days after Trudeau's allegations in September, India temporarily suspended the issuance of visas to Canadian citizens. It resumed some visa services in Canada last month, more than a month after they were suspended.

What Justin Trudeau said on Hardeep Nijjar killing

In a year-end interview with The Canadian Press news agency on Wednesday, Trudeau said he decided to make the announcement on September 18 because he expected that information would be eventually leaked through the media.

The prime minister said the message he delivered in the House of Commons that day was intended as an "extra level of deterrence" to keep Canadians safer.

Trudeau said his public statement came after weeks of "quiet diplomacy" that included raising the allegations with India at the highest levels.

"We knew it would be difficult conversations, but we also knew that this was an important moment for India to be demonstrating its leadership on the world stage with the G20," Trudeau said. "And we felt that we could use that as a constructive opportunity to work together."

"Too many Canadians were worried that they were vulnerable," Trudeau said.

Trudeau also said Canada warned India that what it knew would eventually come out and that while Ottawa had managed to keep things "on a diplomatic level" leading up to the G20 summit, it could not control much beyond that.

In the interview, Trudeau said Canada intends to reveal evidence very much in the fashion the US did when "we reach those points in the investigation." But he noted that US authorities started their investigation into attempted murder earlier.

Last week, external affairs minister S Jaishankar told the Rajya Sabha that Canada has not shared any specific evidence or inputs with India.

(With inputs from agencies)

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 10-12-2023

Why US is touching the RAW nerve

Sandeep Dikshit

In the alleged plot to assassinate Khalistani terrorist Gurbatwant Singh Pannun, officials in India found a startling similarity with an alleged attempt to kill an anti-Iran journalist. In both killings that were to take place in New York but were thwarted by US intelligence agencies, the cutouts who allegedly received the targeting information from the Indian and Iranian governments were arrested in the Czech Republic. "The Czech authorities arrested and detained (Nikhil) Gupta on June 30, 2023, pursuant to the bilateral extradition treaty between the US and the

Czech Republic," reads the US Department of Justice (DoJ) press release on the case that has rocked India-US ties.

Six months earlier, the US DoJ said Polad Omarov, who was allegedly passing on the targeting information from the Iranian government to kill an Iranian-origin journalist in New York, was also arrested in the Czech Republic on January 4, 2023. The Czech connection regularly props up in the US DoJ filings. Suspects wanted in the US for attempted assassinations to wire frauds to child pornography happen to be hauled in by the Czech authorities for quick extradition to the US.

The 'War on Terror' was the biggest slip of the mask for western democracies. Well-documented accounts narrate how these vanguards of human rights plucked hapless men from third countries on a whiff of their al-Qaeda links. Tortured and broken, many were released years later for want of evidence. Third countries, especially smaller European ones, have been especially pliable for US intelligence and the common country of arrest does not, for some intelligence officials here, appear wholly convincing.

India's independent stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict has caused considerable stirring of discomfort in the Langley, the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The clear Indian stand also encouraged several other countries to break bread with President Vladimir Putin, which went against the grain of US policy of completely isolating Russia.

India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) had come quickly under the western scanner soon after bifurcation of the Intelligence Bureau. "The newly created department was able to launch two successful operations — liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 and the merger of Sikkim in 1975," writes former RAW Special Secretary GBS Sidhu in his book, 'Sikkim: Dawn of Democracy'.

The American opposition to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's approach to Pakistan is open knowledge. Less known is that India's takeover of Sikkim did not go down well with the West, as it rankled its then recently found ally China. In between these two events, the United States-United Kingdom combine had been left clueless when India conducted the atomic test in 1974.

Indian intelligence operatives, especially from the RAW, came squarely on the West's radar around the mid-1970s. The three slights — Bangladesh, Sikkim and the nuclear test — spoke of an independent foreign policy mindset. These had been aggravated by India's signing of the Treaty of Friendship with the arch US enemy, the USSR.

(Major) Ravinder Singh's defection to the CIA remains the most talked about. But among the many tales of defections (invariably to the West) by RAW officers, one that went under the radar was of Shamsher Singh,

an IPS officer of the 1957 batch from the Rajasthan cadre. Insiders in RAW believe he was the invisible shadow that guided the Canadian intelligence in nurturing the first lot of Khalistanis who bombed two Air-India planes, one of them in mid-air, killing over 300.

As narrated by GBS Sidhu in 'The Khalistan Conspiracy', the Canadians had not just successfully inveigled Shamsher Singh into switching sides, but they also tried to recruit the author when he landed as his replacement.

"After surrendering his diplomatic passport, Shamsher had apparently obtained an immigration visa on his ordinary passport at the Canadian High Commission in New Delhi. This is something Shamsher would have already arranged for with the concerned Royal Canadian Mounted Police (which at the time did the work now being done by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service) at Ottawa before his departure for New Delhi. It can be safely assumed that in return for such a big favour, Shamsher had compromised his position and shared some crucial information about the Department (R&AW) with the RCMP," wrote Sidhu in his book.

Another prime reason that led to the targeting of police officer Shamsher Singh was the fact that in 1975, as revealed in former RAW chief Vappala Balachandran's 'Intelligence Over Centuries', Indira Gandhi stopped British intelligence from accessing IB's records and outstation offices.

The apparent success in recruiting a mole on the other side to sow discord and strife in his own country has been a very frequently deployed CIA-MI6 playbook which was used about a decade after Shamsher Singh's defection.

India's operations in Sri Lanka were at a delicate stage when the CIA decided to put in play its double asset, KV Unnikrishnan. By now, the RAW station chief in Sri Lanka directing the operations in the country, Unnikrishnan began conveying the Indian tactics and strategy to the US. Not much is thereafter in public domain, but former officials acknowledge that the damage to Indian interests was substantial. Using this information, the West sought to insert itself in the Lankan ethnic dispute.

Indian intelligence though has been on its toes against penetration from Western agencies right from Independence, largely due to Jawaharlal Nehru's independent foreign policy stance. In fact, as the RAW's second chief K Sankaran Nair wrote in his book, 'Inside IB and RAW', India remodelled the Ghanaian intelligence service after its President Kwame Nkrumah complained to Nehru that the influence of British intelligence services in his country was pervasive. The reason was not too difficult to find — having won his country freedom, Nkrumah was under

intensive surveillance from MI5 to find out how and which liberation movements he was supporting. India also sent its brightest — RN Kao — to set up the Foreign Service Research Bureau.

RAW officers have been under no illusions that foreign intelligence collection is a dangerous job. "Unlike the police or the IB, there is no support system abroad. One has to live by one's wit and be as inconspicuous as possible," writes Balachandran.

This is a cross RAW will have to bear as India strikes a path that is not completely aligned with the interests of the West. Otherwise, how does America's repeated insistence, made on a daily basis, for India to cooperate in the probe square up with it itself ignoring hundreds of warrants served on CIA officers by courts of several countries for charges ranging from rape, theft to downright murder?

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 7-12-2023

'From complicated to dating': US envoy to India on ties between two countries

HT Correspondent

US ambassador to India Eric Garcetti on Wednesday said that the India-US relationship is a "force of good for the world," and there was a "positive romantic ambiguity" for the future of the ties as a result of the deep desire on both sides to take it forward.

Speaking at Carnegie's Global Tech Summit 2023, Garcetti said that ties between the two countries are growing increasingly broader and deeper, and the two sides are trying, not only to negotiate the differences, but also the next steps.

Stay tuned with breaking news on HT Channel on Facebook. Join Now

"It's like our Facebook status for a long time, between US and India, was 'It's complicated'. Now, when you log on, it's like, 'They're dating'," he said. "And then we're trying to figure out, maybe we've even moved in together and we're like well your habits are a little different than mine... And we're also trying to figure out, where does this go?"

"There's a positive romantic ambiguity about where this will ultimately lead... But there's a strong desire on both [sides to take the relationship forward]," he said.

He said the G20 was a strong example of the partnership, where it took India to negotiate with countries that it was close to and the US to negotiate with its closest allies to achieve a historic consensus. Russia and China's joint opposition to the language around the war in Ukraine, its implications, and the need for its resolution were a huge obstacle to India's quest to arrive at a joint communique during the G20 Summit, which culminated in Delhi in September.

“India-US relationship is not additive, its multiplicative. We demonstrated that at G20, where it was more than just 1+1 equals 2 countries, 1+1 actually produced 20 countries together with a historic and strongest, deepest statement ever put forward by a G20,” Garcetti said.

The US ambassador also talked about Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s state visit to the United States earlier this year as an example of growing relationship. Normally, he said, “if you get three to five deliverables, that’s a strong state dinner. The week before [the state dinner], we were ploughing through 123 different deliverables.”

The back and forth, he added, didn’t end there and both sides have been in constant communication since, which is “unprecedented”, he said.

He said, he agreed with External Affairs Minister Jaishankar summation on the interactions: Think of that dinner as not as a high point of US India relations but a new base. He said this during a meeting on Monday during US deputy national security advisor Jonathan Finer’s visit to India. Finer was in New Delhi for a review of the India-US Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET).

“[President Joe Biden] is the very first president to say this is most consequential relationship in the world,” he added.

Garcetti agreed that China was an important aspect of India-US ties, but denied the assessment that the US-India relationship was based around China, saying that “our relationship is 95% fundamentally about other things. China is about deterrence.”

“Peace is critical, but deterring war, respecting borders and sovereignty, making sure that we don’t have people who steal intellectual property, that we are not overly dependent on any one place for a supply chain, is a deterrent peace,” he added.

When asked about a scenario where India is not able to absorb the impact of the US-China derisking, he said, “It would be a missed opportunity.”

Talking about how Foreign Direct Investment are not flowing at the levels that both sides are keen on, India, he said faces the challenges from being the “highest taxed input major economy in the world”.

“It’s not a criticism...but it’s harming your own internal capacity to be the manufacturing powerhouse that India should be. That we want it to be. That it is starting to accelerate to become but it will require some fundamentally deeper changes,” he said.

G20 Chief Coordinator Harsh Vardhan Shringla, who also participated in the discussions, said, “The relationship is amazingly multifaceted, but it’s also constantly evolving.”

“US and India are a force for good in the world together, not just for our countries,” he said.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 1-12-2023

India, China hold another WMCC meeting, no sign of breakthrough

Rezaul H Laskar

India and China held another round of diplomatic talks on Thursday on the dragging border standoff in the Ladakh sector of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), though there were no immediate signs of a breakthrough in resolving friction points on the disputed frontier.

This was the 14th meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) on India-China Border Affairs since the standoff began in May 2020, and the two sides had an in-depth discussion on proposals to resolve remaining issues and to achieve complete disengagement in Ladakh, according to a readout from the external affairs ministry.

The readout made no mention of specific forward movement to address existing friction points at Demchok and Depsang, where troops from both sides remain deployed near the LAC. Dozens of rounds of diplomatic and military talks have resulted in the two sides withdrawing troops from other friction points, such as the north and south banks of Pangong Lake, Gogra and Hot Spring.

“The two sides reviewed the situation along the LAC in the Western Sector of the India-China border areas and engaged in an open, constructive and in-depth discussion of proposals to resolve the remaining issues and achieve complete disengagement in Eastern Ladakh,” the readout said.

The two sides further agreed on the “need to maintain peace and tranquillity along the border areas, ensure a stable situation on the ground and avoid any untoward incident”.

India and China agreed to continue the dialogue through military and diplomatic channels and to hold the next round of the senior military commanders’ meeting “at the earliest to achieve the above objective”, the readout said.

After the standoff emerged in the open in May 2020, the WMCC first met virtually in June of the same year, shortly after a brutal clash in Galwan Valley left 20 Indian soldiers and at least four Chinese troops dead. The first fatalities on the LAC in 45 years took bilateral relations to the lowest ebb since the 1962 border war between India and China. Both sides now have some 60,000 troops, each arrayed along the LAC in the Ladakh sector.

The Indian side at Thursday’s meeting of the WMCC was led by the joint secretary (East Asia) of the external affairs ministry, while the director general of the boundary oceanic affairs of China’s foreign ministry led

the Chinese delegation. The WMCC last met in New Delhi on May 31.

Senior military commanders of the two sides have held 20 rounds of talks since the start of the standoff, and the last meeting was held on the Indian side of the Chushul-Moldo border meeting point from October 9-10.

The Chinese leadership has contended the two sides have begun moving towards normalised management of the border situation, which should be put in an “appropriate place” while the two countries work to take forward relations in other spheres such as trade. India has insisted that the situation on the LAC continues to be abnormal, and the overall relationship cannot be normalised till peace and tranquillity is restored on the LAC.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 3-12-2023

India, Maldives agree to set up 'core group' to sort out differences

Sandeep Dikshit

New Delhi, India and the Maldives have decided to set up a “core group” to chart the way forward in bilateral ties after the election of Mohamed Muizzu as Maldives President after defeating pro-India incumbent Ibrahim Mohamed Solih.

The decision to set up the core group was taken at the first meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Muizzu on the sidelines of the COP28 World Climate Action Summit in Dubai.

“President Muizzu and I had a productive meeting today. We discussed ways to enhance the India-Maldives friendship across diverse sectors. We look forward to working together to deepen cooperation for the benefit of our people,” the PM tweeted after the meeting. The Prime Minister had not attended the swearing-in ceremony of Muizzu, who had campaigned on “India Out” platform and had declared after winning that the Indian military forces should immediately leave the island nation. Later, he said more than 100 bilateral agreements with India would be reviewed.

Breaking with customary practice, Muizzu had skipped India as his first overseas destination after becoming President and had opted for Turkiye. In a signal that the Maldives need not rely only on Indian largesse, Muizzu had visited the UAE and returned with the promise of a loan to complete an infrastructure project that New Delhi had financed so far. PM Modi and Muizzu discussed ways to further bolster India-Maldives relations in sectors about economic relations, development cooperation, and people-to-people ties, said an official readout.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 15-12-2023

After troop removal demand, Maldives says ending pact with India on water survey

Shubhajit Roy

Barely a month after asking India to withdraw its military personnel from the Maldives, the government of President Mohamed Muizzu, whose party rode to power on an ‘India Out’ poll campaign, has decided not to renew the previous government’s agreement with India on a hydrographic survey of the island nation’s waters.

The agreement, signed on June 8, 2019 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the Maldives at the invitation of then President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, allowed India to conduct a hydrographic survey of the Maldivian territorial waters, study and chart reefs, lagoons, coastlines, ocean currents and tide levels.

This is the first bilateral pact that the newly-elected Maldives government, which took charge in November, is officially terminating

At a press conference Thursday, Mohamed Firuzul Abdul Khaleel, Undersecretary for Public Policy at the Maldives President’s Office, said the Muizzu government has decided against renewing the hydrography agreement which expires on June 7, 2024.

“According to the terms of this agreement, if one party wishes to drop the agreement, the other party must be informed of the decision six months before the agreement is set to expire. According to the terms, the agreement automatically renews for an additional five years, otherwise,” he said.

Firuzul said India has been informed that the Maldives does not wish to proceed with the agreement.

Sources in Male told The Indian Express that the Maldives government has conveyed the Muizzu administration’s decision to the Indian High Commission there.

According to Maldives news outlet The Sun, Muizzu made the decision after consulting his cabinet. The Sun quoted Firuzul saying the administration believes it is “best for national security to improve the Maldivian military’s capacity to conduct such surveys, and protect such sensitive information”.

“In the future, hydrography works will be carried out under 100 per cent Maldivian management, and with only Maldivians privy to the information,” he said.

Earlier this month, Muizzu said that the Indian government had agreed to withdraw its soldiers from the Maldives.

Sources in New Delhi had said the issue was briefly discussed in Dubai, on the sidelines of the COP28 summit, where Muizzu met Prime Minister Modi, and that discussions on how to keep the Indian helicopters and aircraft operational were “ongoing” and “the core group” that both sides had agreed to set up would “look at details of how to take this forward”.

Muizzu had chosen Turkey as his first foreign destination, in a departure from past Maldivian Presidents who had chosen India as the first stop after entering office.

The island nation has two helicopters and an aircraft provided by India to the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) for emergency medical evacuations and disaster relief operations. There are 77 Indian military personnel in Maldives to operate these platforms.

Muizzu won the Presidential election, promising to change the Maldives’s ‘India First’ policy and remove the presence of Indian military personnel.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 3-12-2023

Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets Qatar's ruler, discusses well-being of Indian community

The meeting is significant as eight former Indian Navy personnel were on October 26 given death sentences by a court in Qatar and the Indian government has reportedly filed an appeal against the sentence

PTI, New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani on the sidelines of the COP28 summit in Dubai on Friday, as they discussed bilateral partnership and the well-being of the Indian community in the oil-rich country.

The meeting is significant as eight former Indian Navy personnel were on October 26 given death sentences by a court in Qatar and the Indian government has reportedly filed an appeal against the sentence.

"On the sidelines of the COP28 Summit in Dubai yesterday, had the opportunity to meet HH Sheikh @TamimBinHamad, the Amir of Qatar.

"We had a good conversation on the potential of bilateral partnership and the well-being of the Indian community in Qatar," Modi posted on X on Saturday.

The Indian nationals, who worked with private company Al Dahra, were arrested in August last year reportedly in an alleged case of espionage. Neither the Qatari authorities nor New Delhi made the charges against the Indian nationals public.

India had described the ruling by the court in Qatar as "deeply" shocking and had vowed to explore all legal options in the case.

Prime Minister Modi had a hectic schedule on Friday as he addressed four sessions at the UN climate change conference, met various world leaders and also held some bilateral meetings.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 8-12-2023

Indian envoy meets 8 ex-Navy men on death row in Qatar

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, The Ministry of External Affairs on Thursday said it is focused on the judicial process regarding eight former Navy personnel sentenced to death by a Doha court in October even as India's envoy to Qatar met the detained men on Sunday, said Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Arindam Bagchi.

Deepak Mittal, the previous Indian envoy and currently the lead negotiator on the Qatar case, was also given access twice after the former Navy personnel were arrested in Doha last September.

Indian embassy officials have been given periodic access to ascertain their well-being, Bagchi had said when the second consular access was granted last December. Two hearings on the appeal against the death sentence have already taken place.

"We are closely following the matter and extending all legal and consular assistance," said Bagchi. The former Indian Navy personnel were on October 26 given death sentence by Qatar's Court of First Instance. India described the ruling as "deeply shocking" and said it would explore all legal options in the case. The MEA also said it was attaching "high importance" to the case.

The Indian nationals, who worked with private company Al Dahra, were arrested in August last year reportedly in an alleged case of espionage. The charges were filed against the eight Indian Navy veterans on March 25 and they were tried under Qatari law.

MEA mum on Modi raising issue at COP28

Asked if PM Modi took it up with Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani when they met on the sidelines of COP28 in Dubai last week, Arindam Bagchi did not give a direct reply and referred to Modi's post on 'X'. "We had a good conversation on the potential of bilateral ties and the well-being of the Indian community in Qatar," the PM had said.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 12-12-2023

BANGLADESH-INDIA RELATIONS

An increasingly complicated friendship

Zaillur Rahman

Contemporary geopolitical relations between Bangladesh and India are based on a few age-old principles. When discussing India and Bangladesh, we must first acknowledge that India's backing of Bangladesh in 1971 was the most important external factor in Bangladesh's independence. We must also recognise that Bangladesh and India are entwined in an unusual geographic reality, in which Bangladesh is surrounded on all but one side by India and shares with it 54 rivers that flow from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. These are the primary principles that underpin any India-Bangladesh diplomatic cooperation and dialogue. However, a critical component to bolster India-Bangladesh relations would be a significant strategy or initiative from either India or Bangladesh to strengthen people-to-people links between the two countries.

The cultural exchanges between India and Bangladesh are mostly confined within West Bengal and Northeast India. Perhaps it is assumed that the existing cultural ties between Bangladesh and India are sufficient to supplement a deliberate and robust people-to-people diplomacy model. However, according to a foreign relations perception poll on Bangladeshis by US non-profit The International Republican Institute (IRI), there was a significant increase in distrustful sentiments towards India from 2019 to 2023. When asked in the 2019 poll whether they believed India was having a positive or negative impact on Bangladesh, 52 percent Bangladeshis voted for "very positive" and "somewhat positive," 20 percent opted for "somewhat negative" and "very negative," and the remainder did not respond. When asked the same question in 2023, the positive distribution was 50 percent, while the negative increased to 37 percent.

There is still a lot of goodwill among the Bangladeshi people for what India did 52 years ago. However, it seems that India might be coasting along on that goodwill without any significant attempts to improve its image in the eyes of Bangladeshis. New Delhi appears unconcerned about the ramifications of the spillover of communally divisive discourse, from Indian internal politics to Indian international affairs. Relations have also been strained as a result of the failed agreement to share Teesta River's waters (which was ready to be signed in September 2011), fears over the transboundary effects of India's National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, as well as all the highly publicised instances of border killings of Bangladeshi citizens. The lack of Indian media coverage and analysis of these factors results in regular Indian citizens being

taken aback when faced with the antagonism harboured by a country they believe their country had helped liberate.

The reality of the matter is that there have been a lot of events after the Liberation War that enabled anti-India sentiments to take root in Bangladesh. One such example is the Farakka Barrage issue, which many believe was the first major cause behind grassroots-level anti-Indianism rising in the late 1980s. The ecological effect of the barrage was so bad that Bangladesh was forced to go to the United Nations and submit a formal protest against India to the UN General Assembly, which issued a consensus statement on the matter on November, 26 1976. Yet, the issue was never fully resolved. The ramifications of this have lingered for decades—but the topic is rarely discussed or examined in depth by Indian media.

In fact, before 2008, Bangladesh had very rarely been covered in-depth by India's print and electronic media. When we were mentioned, as highlighted by a research by Shariful Islam, the dominant images were of Bangladesh being a "wasteland" marked by utter poverty, natural disasters, religious bigotry and fundamentalism, and a den of anti-Indian forces and a major source of infiltrators. There is truth to all these representations. On one end, there is the scandalous 10-truck illegal arms and ammunition haul incident of 2004. On the other, there are the allegations of Indian sponsorship of separatists in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The negative impressions go both ways. But if these are the only images chosen to depict a close neighbour, with little context given, there will surely be a long-lasting impact on the public psyche of both Indian and Bangladeshi nationals. Only after the incumbent administration took office in 2009 was there a noticeable shift in Bangladesh-India ties, mirrored in Indian media's increasingly nuanced and glowing analysis of Bangladesh.

However, even now, in any matter related to Bangladesh, be it the economy, military, politics, or cricket, the Indian media has often attempted to stain the sovereign entity of Bangladesh. Whether that be the various allusions of Bangladeshis as 'termites', or BJP's Subramanian Swamy's publicly stated desire to invade Bangladesh, there is certainly a visible trend of hostility among a certain part of India's media and political discourse.

The prevalent notion among the Bangladeshi people currently is an assumption of Indian interference in Bangladesh's politics. In 2013, when BNP and other opposition parties were preparing to boycott the election in order to seek an election-time caretaker administration, Indian Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh visited Bangladesh. During her two-day visit, it is alleged that Singh successfully prevented HM Ershad and his party from boycotting the election. After

spending 22 hours in an undisclosed location, Ershad met with Singh and stated that the Jatiya Party, the third-biggest opposition, would join the election—a move which ultimately granted the 2013 election a semblance of legitimacy.

Similarly, former Indian president Pranab Mukherjee stated in his autobiography, *The Coalition Years*, that in February 2008, Bangladesh army's chief Moeen Uddin Ahmed had gone to India on a six-day visit. During the informal interaction, Pranab Mukherjee impressed upon Moeen Ahmed the importance of releasing political prisoners. Pranab Mukherjee mentioned in his book that all prominent political leaders, including Sheikh Hasina, were imprisoned during the period. According to Pranab, Moeen was apprehensive about being dismissed by Sheikh Hasina after her release, and the Indian president assured Moeen of his security. Not only that, but Pranab Mukherjee also admonished Awami League leaders for not standing by the side of their party leader. Even the current Bangladeshi PM herself used to repeatedly accuse the CIA and RAW of having an active role in the 2001 election, when BNP came to power. Unfortunately, the truth of those statements is no longer a matter of debate in Bangladesh. They are just taken for granted.

Despite the existing negative preconditions, it has to be understood that both Bangladesh and India need each other to thrive. The emerging market of a rapidly developing Bangladesh and its geostrategic importance as a land bridge between South and East Asia are all factors that India needs to take advantage of to fulfil its greater regional and global geopolitical and geoeconomic ambitions. Currently, India is Bangladesh's second-largest import market after China but while 10 percent of Bangladesh's total trade is with India, India's trade with Bangladesh is only 1 percent. This means that Bangladesh has the potential to increase its trade with India. According to the World Bank, there is a potential for \$16.4 billion of bilateral trade, if the connectivity issues between India and Bangladesh are solved.

Of course, as India carries the title of being the largest democracy in the world, it must also be vocal against all anti-democratic activities in its neighbouring nations. However, diplomatic ties must flourish from both top-down and bottom-up. India has to explore people-to-people diplomatic tools for a more sustainable relationship.

Often, India has been accused of blacklisting and restricting visas of any foreign intellectuals who offer alternative or challenging viewpoints about its foreign policy. This is definitely not the way to resolve the issues at hand. India must invest in programmes initiated by non-state actors with political goals that are in line with (but independent of) state foreign policy

objectives in places where official public diplomacy channels do not exist. This can be done through track 2 diplomacy, peace workshops, youth forums, etc. Crucially, India must also enable—or at least not actively hamper—people's initiatives that challenge governments' policies. Indian policymakers should be cognisant of foreign policy steps which are causing schisms. In this regard, both state-to-state and people-to-people approaches to diplomacy are needed to address and resolve these festering issues. The only way forward is to have open conversations between people to understand what people want—that is, an equal relationship.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 13-12-2023

What do they want from Bangladesh?

Rubana Huq

Recently, the US government rolled out the Presidential Memorandum on Advancing Worker Empowerment, Rights, and High Labor Standards Globally. During his speech, Secretary of State Antony Blinken made specific references to Bangladesh and added that the US government would work to “hold accountable” those who threaten and attack labour rights and would impose trade sanctions, penalties, and visa restrictions on countries that deviate from what the US advocates for. Almost immediately, this triggered US buyers into inserting clauses in contracts relating to shipments, clearly stating that in cases of any sanctions or trade embargoes, the payment conditions in the sales contract would lose validity.

Of course, it's clear that there is a political context behind any “memorandum” and that these sanctions and embargoes are often imposed by nations that do not politically favour countries that fall short of their expectations.

The question is, what is it that they want from Bangladesh?

It's pretty obvious that most individuals, most companies, and most nations want to look good while doing the least and by routinely rolling out megaphone rhetoric. But how far have the Western countries themselves come so far?

A quick story is in order.

Instead of better governance yielding better returns, and instead of strategising to maximise returns with good practices, most companies in the US emphasise “value” over “values.” Florida and four other US states have banned pension funds being invested with asset managers dealing with Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) factors. Additionally, 17 red states, led by Texas, bar state pension funds from being

invested with asset managers who disfavour oil, gas and firearms. The US multinational investment company BlackRock has \$170 billion worth of investments in non-renewable energy; Apple, Amazon and Tesla all fail human rights-related rankings. Tesla and Apple, being major battery users, are engaged in cobalt mining; Apple also uses child labour in the Congo and Uighur labour in China. These are stories that ought to shame the nations that host these businesses.

Apart from these heinous practices, many companies want to merely pass the ESG test, with their real goal being to ensure profits for the shareholders and issue materially misleading statements. In many instances, simply adopting a resolution (watch COP28 and its endless resolutions) is rewarded. A few years ago, ESG data vendor MSCI came up with ratings of 155 companies, which were upgraded in 18 months without the companies actually making any changes besides, say, adopting a data protection policy. Only one firm got upgraded because of actual carbon emission cuts.

The standards are so off a real metric that it's clear why Apple scores highly despite labour violations at Foxconn, and why Chevron tops as an ESG performer despite the tailpipe fumes from cars that have their tanks filled with gasoline refined from oil. There's a reason why in 2022 Goldman agreed to pay \$1.5 million to quash greenwashing investigations, and why no one talks about the McDonald's story of rising methane emissions from cattle flatulence and instead focuses on the company's high ESG rating, which it gained by making packaging less wasteful two years ago.

The reason why hypocrisy prevails is because many powerful nations, including the US, only tick the boxes of standards that they themselves ignore but prescribe to others.

Today, the West talks about us violating human rights, whereas at their own ends, they host companies which singularly focus on profit instead of purpose and seek financial return in place of ethical return. Even selling goodness data (ESG ratings) is a huge, \$1 billion business. The whole world seems to be spinning around financial materiality, whereas, on the ground, little is being done to make consumers aware. That there is a greater need to invest in human capital (besides just having minimum wage conversations) is something that many Western companies do not see or care to understand. And that is why it hurts the most when Bangladesh, which employs four million workers in its ready-made garment (RMG) sector, is deplored for having unfair labour practices.

Luckily, things are changing in academia and, much to our pleasure, New York University's business school has just come up with a report that refers to job creation as the "unrewarded social virtue." It points out that ESG ratings reward tech companies for shedding jobs as no

visible labour means no labour problems. Unfortunately, in today's world, tech companies are deemed the most virtuous bunch while the industrials wear the "ugly" tags. After all, handling a few thousand people in a factory does consume energy, while saving energy by writing software requires little or almost none.

A recent essay in The New York Times by Yvon Chouinard, owner of Patagonia, caught my attention. He writes about taxing companies that source lower quality apparel. Patagonia is a company that has close-to-zero sourcing from Bangladesh and sells jackets to consumers by preaching mending an existing garment instead of buying a new one. It promotes sustainable consumption without having the faintest idea about a poor, hardworking worker from Bangladesh who would have no job if brands reduced their sourcing. I am not an apologist for waste, but I do believe in the brands paying more even when they source less. Chouinard's "Responsibili-Tee" sells for \$45 and his long-sleeved, "organic" cotton flannel shirt sells for \$99, while many buyers pay \$1 for a tee and \$3 for flannels when sourcing from Bangladesh. Are the products sourced from Vietnam or Turkey or elsewhere 15 times better than what Bangladesh supplies? Nope. It's just that the country concept of Bangladesh is at the lowest ebb, for now and ever, helping sourcing departments to aim for the "cheap."

Real change actually happened in 1758 with the Quaker Philadelphia Yearly Meeting prohibiting members from engaging in the slave trade; with Martin Luther King expanding the scope of Operation Breadbasket in 1967; with a naked nine-year-old Vietnamese girl running towards a camera in June 1972, her body burnt by a napalm bomb attack, causing outrage against Dow Chemical (which manufactured napalm for the US armed forces during the Vietnam War); and with Reverend Sullivan introducing principles in 1977 to pressurise businesses to draft a charter calling for an end to apartheid in South Africa. But the times have truly changed. Some nations have by now learnt to penalise nations through arm-twisting announcements of potential embargoes and sanctions. Instead of taking full advantage of being part of a great story of labour and actually contributing to the cause, a few countries in the West now wear the badge of pride for the wrong reasons—especially when the transgressors live right within their own borders. Little do they realise that through their poorly scripted labour rights dialogues, they end up hurting workers the most.

The least that the West can do now is set the records straight and admit that it is pointless to feed wrong and confusing goals to consumers, and that it's time to measure real outcomes in Bangladesh's economy instead of issuing threats and rocking the industry that feeds millions here.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 11-12-2023**Bridge this deficit between
India and Sri Lanka****T. Ramakrishnan**

The announcement by Sri Lanka's President Ranil Wickremesinghe, recently, on enhanced connectivity with India has come none too soon. Twenty years ago, in Chennai, Wickremesinghe, then Prime Minister, while delivering a lecture, floated the idea of building a bridge linking Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu (TN) with Talaimanar in the Northern Province (NP) of Sri Lanka. This was a part of his larger vision of regional economic integration, encompassing his country and the Southern States of India and aimed at generating more opportunities for economic growth.

He has been discussing the concept of economic integration on many occasions and at several international fora. But, whenever groups and parties claiming to represent the interests of Sinhalese-Buddhists expressed their opposition to the proposal on the ground that this would not benefit Sri Lanka, the talk of having expanded physical connectivity would die down.

In December 2015, when India's Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari informed the Lok Sabha that the Asian Development Bank was willing to fund the bridge project, Sri Lanka's response was muted followed by sharp criticism from the project's opponents.

However, to the credit of President Wickremesinghe and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the idea of land connectivity was not abandoned. It found a mention in a joint statement issued in July this year after the two leaders met in New Delhi. The document even stated that "a feasibility study for such connectivity will be conducted at an early date." As a follow up, President Wickremesinghe, who is also Finance Minister, in his Budget address on November 13, referred to the project of land connectivity and said "We expect to utilise Colombo Port to meet the supply needs of Southwest India and Trincomalee Port to meet the supply needs of Southeast India".

But the relationship between the two countries in the area of infrastructure development, energy links and trade should be much deeper than what it is now.

However, some of these ideas have been discussed much earlier. For example, the idea of connecting the electricity networks of the two countries was floated even in 1970 – more than 50 years ago.

Over 13 years have lapsed since the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the bilateral grid, but not even one unit of electricity has been transmitted. On the other hand, in the case of

neighbouring Bangladesh, India has been exporting at least 7,000 million units (MU) annually for the last couple of years. About a month ago, Prime Minister Modi and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina jointly commissioned, in virtual mode, the second unit of the Rampal Maitree Power Project (660 Megawatts), apart from launching two other infrastructure projects. In fact, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh had inked MoUs with India in the same year (2010) for collaboration in the power sector.

It is not that no energy projects are being taken up by the former, as there are certain projects underway involving Indian participation in the energy sector, particularly renewable energy. Besides, the island nation needed time to recover from the protracted civil war of 30 years. Yet, the progress of the transmission network project, envisaging the transfer of 1,000 MW and the establishment of a High Voltage Direct Current overhead link between Madurai (India) and Habarana (Sri Lanka), does not reflect well on the two countries.

Had the facility been in place in 2022, Sri Lanka would not have suffered power cuts and blackouts. A day may come when India will be able to source cheaper power from Sri Lanka. The two countries should be focused to ensure that the deadline of 2030 is met in this regard.

Energy is not the only area where progress has been tardy. The India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was signed in December 1998, yet the two countries have not yet been able to go beyond it despite holding talks for years on entering into an Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA). After a break of almost five years, negotiations resumed a few weeks ago.

Notwithstanding several constraints, even now, bilateral economic ties seem to be on a better footing with India regaining its position last year as the largest source of imports and accounting for about 26 percent of total imports of Sri Lanka, though certain portions of imports were through the Credit Lines offered by India in the wake of the 2022 economic crisis.

In the area of tourism, which is a major source of revenue for Sri Lanka, India remained the largest single country of tourist arrivals, with its share being 17 percent of the overall number of arrivals. But the potential is much higher and the underperformance of Sri Lanka is telling, going by India's bilateral trade in 2021 with its southern neighbour and Bangladesh, whose recent economic growth has been rather impressive. The size of the former was US\$ 5.45 billion in 2021 whereas that of the latter was US\$ 18.14 billion.

Sri Lanka, which has a long track record of the incumbent Government ensuring the smooth transition of power to its successor after an electoral defeat, should not be bogged down in the baggage of history. The presence of anti-Indian nationalist forces in the

political class is nothing unique to this country. Still, Bangladesh has shown the way to have a mutually-beneficial economic relationship with India.

In fact, with respect to Sri Lanka, the momentum generated by certain developments in the last one year (the resumption of Alliance Air services between Chennai and Jaffna, the launch of passenger ferry services between Nagapattinam and Kankesanthurai (KKS) and a joint venture agreement among India's National Dairy Development Board, the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation and Cargills of Sri Lanka for self-sufficiency in the dairy sector should be sustained and improved upon. There is every reason why Sri Lanka, once viewed favourably for its high standards of living and stable economy, should be keen on making this a reality.

The writer is a former Colombo correspondent for The Hindu.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 5-12-2023

Relations between Sri Lanka and the EU reviewed in Brussels

The Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the European Union Grace Asirwatham, who is completing her tour of duty in Brussels by the end of December 2023, had a farewell meeting with Paola Pampaloni, Deputy Managing Director of the Asia Pacific Department of the European External Action Service (EEAS) recently.

During the meeting, Ambassador Asirwatham and the Deputy Managing Director shared insights into the growing relations between the EU and Sri Lanka, expressing mutual appreciation for the existing cooperation and understanding. Both sides expressed satisfaction with the performance of the bilateral mechanisms, such as the joint commission, working group on governance, rule of law, and human rights, working group on trade and economic cooperation, and working group on development cooperation, and reviewed the arrangements for the next meetings to be held in early 2024. They also considered the progress achieved in the identified areas under the GSP Plus facility and acknowledged the need to take further action to expedite reaching the desired results.

The Deputy Managing Director commended Sri Lanka's unwavering commitment and proactive engagement in the ministerial meetings of the EU's Indo-Pacific cooperation strategy. Furthermore, there was optimism that, as the current chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Sri Lanka will play a pivotal role in the upcoming ministerial meeting scheduled to take place in Brussels early next year.

Highlighting the close and constructive cooperation between the European External Action Service (EEAS)

and the Sri Lanka Mission to the EU, Deputy Managing Director Pampaloni extended congratulations to Ambassador Asirwatham for her dedication to elevating bilateral relations.

The farewell meeting concluded with a luncheon hosted in honour of the outgoing Ambassador Asirwatham.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 5-12-2023

Saudi Arabia extends helping hand to develop Sri Lanka's economy

Saudi Arabia consistently supports Sri Lanka's economic development through humanitarian aid and substantial projects, creating job opportunities for over 5 million Sri Lankans. Under the leadership of King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, and Minister of Economy and Planning Faisal Falil Al Ibrahim, Saudi Arabia aims to enhance Sri Lanka's economy.

During Minister Faisal Al Ibrahim's recent successful visit to Sri Lanka, discussions at the Presidential Palace with President Ranil Wickremesinghe focused on strengthening economic ties, particularly in apparel and tourism. The post-LTTE era has seen increased Saudi Arabian tourists, contributing to Sri Lanka's economic growth. The agro-tourism sector and garment exports were key points in the talks.

Minister Faisal Al Ibrahim emphasized Saudi Arabia's commitment to enhancing regional economic ties, with Sri Lanka holding a significant position. The Minister engaged with CEOs of major Sri Lankan companies, discussing various aspects of economic and investment cooperation. Meetings with Sri Lanka's Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Sabri covered deepening economic relationships and addressing common issues.

The gathering took place at Galle Face Hotel, Colombo, with the participation of Minister of Power and Energy Kanchana Wijesekhara, as well as State Ministers Taraka Balasuriya and Shehan Semasinghe, and Saudi Arabian Ambassador Khalid Bin Hamood Al Qahtani. Saudi Arabia's robust economy, driven by initiatives like Vision 2030 and significant projects, positions it as a formidable global competitor. Recent oil discoveries in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia are expected to further strengthen the economy of the kingdom.

In addition, the nation's strides in eliminating corruption have also played a pivotal role in its transformation into a hub of extensive development and prosperity. (M. H. *Shehudeen Madani, Director, Al Hikma Welfare Association, Colombo*)

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 11-12-2023

Nepal, China to discuss implementation modality for cross-border power line

The two sides agreed to construct the 220kV Kerung-Rasuwigadhi-Chilime power line with a Chinese grant during Prime Minister Dahal's China visit in September.

PRITHVI MAN SHRESTHA

KATHMANDU, Nepal and China are set to discuss the implementation modality of the proposed 220kV Jilong/Kerung-Rasuwigadhi-Chilime Cross-Border Power Transmission line as the two sides engage to fix a joint mechanism meeting.

When Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal visited China in September, the two sides had signed an agreement that China would provide grants to construct the cross-border power line.

"The two sides will launch the construction of the Jilong/Kerung-Rasuwigadhi-Chilime 220kV Cross-Border Power Transmission line at an early date," said the joint statement issued during the visit.

It would be the first-ever cross-border power line between the two neighbours even though Nepal has a dozen of such power lines with its southern neighbour—India. Nepali officials say that the transmission line with India would open the door to cross-border power trade with China, too.

"As the Chinese side agreed to provide a grant, there will be a discussion on how to utilise the Chinese grant when the two sides meet," said Komal Nath Atreya, chief of the Ratmate-Rasuwigadhi-Kerung Transmission Line Project, who has also been entrusted with the responsibility of coordinating with the Chinese side for constructing the proposed 220kV cross-border line. "There will be discussion on whether the northern neighbour will provide a grant through our bank accounts or it will make direct payment to the contractor."

According to Atreya, two sides are discussing the date for the meeting of the Joint Working Group and the Joint Technical Working Group, which has the representatives of the NEA and the State Grid Corporation of China and works as a wing of the Working Group.

Another wing under the Joint Working Group is the Joint Commercial Group. "We had proposed a December meeting but it may not happen this month. The Chinese side has not suggested any date. But we are having a continuous discussion with them," said Atreya.

Following the agreement for Beijing to fund the project, the energy ministry has instructed the NEA to do the homework for implementing the agreement, according to electricity authority officials.

China agreed to fund a 16-km section on Nepal's side, apart from building the transmission line on their side, which is around 80km from the border, according to NEA officials.

"Besides working out an implementation modality, a fresh detailed project report and environment impact assessment should also be conducted," Dirghayu Kumar Shrestha, chief of the transmission directorate at the NEA, told the Post in late September. "This may take around 3–4 years."

Earlier, Nepal had proposed building the 400kV Ratmate-Rasuwigadhi-Kerung Cross-Border Transmission Line for electricity trade with China.

The NEA has already conducted a feasibility study for the project, whose proposed length is around 70km and can evacuate 5,000MW power. However, during the meeting of the Joint Working Group held in February, the Chinese side called for reducing the capacity of the power line to 220kV, and Nepal finally agreed.

Nepal is building a 220kV substation at the Chilime Hub, and the northern neighbour is also distributing power in its bordering areas with a 220kV line, an NEA official told the Post earlier. The official said that the Chinese side wanted to start with a low-capacity line so that the project could be developed as early as possible.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 2-12-2023

Nepal, India review progress of India-funded projects

Post Report

KATHMANDU, Indian and Nepali officials on Thursday held a meeting to review the progress of various projects being built with India's assistance.

The meeting discussed ongoing projects in various sectors within the India-Nepal development cooperation framework. The projects include those funded under grant assistance and lines of credit, according to a statement issued by the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu.

According to the statement, the meeting also deliberated on potential sectors of collaboration between India and Nepal in the future.

During the meeting, Indian envoy Naveen Srivastava highlighted Indian development cooperation and reiterated the Indian government's commitment and support towards working with the government of Nepal in the future as per the latter's priorities.

Finance Minister Prakash Sharan Mahat appreciated the Indian support and highlighted its significance in advancing Nepal's developmental efforts.

He expressed the government's commitment to further enhancing the cooperation in other potential sectors as well.

The Indian side was led by Srivastava and the Nepali side by Finance Minister Mahat.

Representatives of relevant ministries, departments and agencies of the government of Nepal involved in the implementation of the projects, as well as Indian embassy officials participated in the meeting.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 14-12-2023

KSA, Iran share same stance on Gaza war

TEHRAN- Saudi Arabia's foreign minister has stated that the kingdom shares Iran's position over the Gaza issue and that further international efforts are needed to put a stop to Israel's assault on the Palestinian people.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and his Saudi counterpart Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud held a meeting on the sidelines of the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in Geneva on Wednesday.

During their discussion, the two senior diplomats talked about a variety of bilateral, regional, and global topics, with a focus on finding a solution to stop the Zionist regime's attacks on Gaza.

Saudi Arabia, according to Bin Farhan, agrees with Iran on the need of supporting the Palestinian people, establishing a prompt truce in Gaza, and delivering humanitarian relief to the beleaguered enclave.

The Saudi minister praised the improving relations between Riyadh and Tehran, calling them "on the right track," and stated that his nation supports the growth of political and economic cooperation with Iran.

He called for the fulfillment of the accords, hailing the two countries' cooperation agreements as a strong point.

Amir Abdollahian expressed gratitude to Saudi Arabia for hosting the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summit to discuss the Gaza conflict.

He also condemned the ongoing war crimes and genocide committed by the Israeli regime in Gaza and the West Bank, calling for concerted efforts from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the other Muslim and regional states to put pressure on the U.S. and Zionist regime to guarantee an immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and provide humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people.

"Israeli war in Gaza may spark regional burst"

Amir Abdollahian and his Lebanese counterpart Abdallah Bou Habib held a meeting on the sidelines of the GRF in Switzerland on Tuesday.

The foreign minister of Iran issued a warning, stating that if the Zionist regime's military attacks on Gaza continue, it could escalate tensions and lead to a regional explosion.

"Iran and Lebanon are on the same front, and Iran only wants the best interests of the Lebanese government,

nation, and resistance front," Amir Abdollahian said, praising the ongoing discussions on a range of bilateral and regional issues between Tehran and Beirut.

Touching on the critical circumstances in Palestine, the senior Iranian diplomat said, "It is necessary that the United States put an end to its unlimited support for the Zionist regime and its war crimes against the Palestinian nation."

"Lebanon has always been one of the key pillars of anti-Zionist resistance in the region," Amir Abdollahian continued, emphasizing the necessity for joint efforts to stop the Zionists' genocide in Palestine.

For his part, the Lebanese foreign minister expressed satisfaction with the meeting with his Iranian counterpart, stating that "consultations between the two sides have always been fruitful and constructive."

Bou Habib also spoke on the situation in Lebanon, namely the situation along the country's southern borders with territories under occupation.

Iran warns of U.S. post-war plot for Gaza

Amir Abdollahian held talks with his Tunisian counterpart Nabil Ammar on the sidelines of the GRF in Geneva on Tuesday.

Iran's foreign minister asserted that in order to make up for the Zionist regime's inability to crush the Palestinian resistance groups, the U.S. administration is orchestrating political schemes for the Gaza Strip's post-war destiny.

Amir Abdollahian emphasized the need for Islamic countries to resolutely stand with Palestine in opposition to the Zionist regime's ongoing war crimes and brutal attacks in Gaza and the West Bank.

He further highlighted the blow to the Zionist regime's dignity on October 7 and its inability to produce meaningful results despite committing heinous war crimes against Palestinian citizens over the last two months.

Ammar, for his part, underlined the need of working together to raise relations to a higher level.

He also advocated for more effective measures to strengthen relationships, notably in the economic and commercial domains, in line with their political ties.

The Tunisian foreign minister praised Iran for its constant support for Palestine, saying, "In Tunisia, we ardently support the cause of Palestine, firmly believing that killing the Palestinian nation will not lead to any gains."

Iran appreciates Vatican for stances on Gaza war

In a meeting with the Vatican Prime Minister, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, on Wednesday, Amir Abdollahian, expressing satisfaction with the meeting, pointed to the recent important telephone conversation between President Raisi and Pope Francis and welcomed the

continuation of such talks between Iran and the Vatican in various fields.

He also regarded the religious and scientific dialogues between Iran and the Vatican vital and substantial, adding that Tehran always supports such dialogues.

Iran's top diplomat appreciated the Vatican's good positions regarding Palestine and said, "We believe that the Vatican can play an effective role in ending the genocide in Palestine."

For his part, Cardinal Parolin expressed concern on the current situation in Palestine and said that "Vatican supports the establishment of a ceasefire and an immediate end to the war in Palestine."

He emphasized that Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasized the necessity of stopping the war and establishing a ceasefire, sending humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people, and finding a political solution to the crisis.

"Concerted efforts required to end Gaza war"

In another meeting with his Jordanian counterpart, Ayman Safadi, on Wednesday, Abdollahian thanked Jordan for its efforts to support Palestine, establish a ceasefire and end the genocide of Palestinians.

He also pointed to the evil plans of the Zionist regime to advance its expansionist plans and displace the Palestinian people from Gaza and the West Bank, noting that it is necessary to shore up extensive efforts to support the Palestinian people, strengthen their stability, and send large-scale humanitarian aid.

Safadi, for his part, also expressed satisfaction with the meeting, stating that the Palestinian people are not only killed by bombing, but also by the lack of food and medicine and the devastation of places and hospitals.

He also described the dire situation in Gaza as "tragic" where lots of people have been stuck under the rubble.

Iran appreciates Kuwait strong positions on Gaza

In yet another meeting with his Kuwaiti counterpart, Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, on Wednesday, Amir Abdollahian appreciated the strong supportive positions of the government, the parliament and the people of Kuwait toward Palestine.

Emphasizing the importance of continuous consultations between the two countries at different levels, he described them as "important and effective" in the development of relations between the two countries.

For his part, the top Kuwaiti diplomat welcomed the joint efforts to develop relations between the two countries.

He underscored the Kuwaiti government's position in support of the Palestinian nation and the establishment of a Palestinian state in the Palestinian territories as a fixed and unchangeable position of Kuwait.

He emphasized the necessity of trying to thwart the Israeli regime in pursuing expansionist plans and ending the attacks against Gaza and establishing a ceasefire.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 9-12-2023

Raisi Moscow Visit

A stepping stone to strategic ties

By Leonid Issaev

MOSCOW- Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's current visit to Moscow is logical and well-timed. There is a regional dimension, which is related to the fact that after Vladimir Putin's visit to the Arabian Peninsula it is important to meet with the Iranian leadership as well, in order to demonstrate a balanced approach towards crucial Middle Eastern actors.

Russia and Iran have rather an important agenda, which, firstly, means that the parties are preparing to sign a long-term co-operation agreement at the initiative of the Iranian side, which is expected to cement Russia's status as a long-term partner of Iran. This document will be signed in the near future.

Besides, a document on Iran's accession to a free trade zone with the Eurasian Economic Union is at the final stage of negotiation, which will remove trade barriers and significantly facilitate trade between Russia and the entire Eurasian commonwealth. BRICS topics are certainly high on the agenda of both countries at the moment. In fact, this is the first summit meeting between the leadership of Russia and the leadership of Iran, a country that was recently invited to join BRICS.

And there are benefits for both sides. First of all, there is an issue related to the agreement on a common stance on oil. As the entry of Iran and Saudi Arabia into BRICS will allow the association to act as an additional platform for developing a consolidated position on oil production, which will be a logical addition to the existing OPEC+ mechanisms.

There are also sanctions, which will probably be one of the key issues from the point of view of both Russian and Iranian agendas. The entry of Saudi Arabia and Iran into BRICS in the near future will contribute to further normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is beneficial for Russia, because Russia is really interested in the normalization of relations between its two key partners in West Asia. This could facilitate Russia's trade, economic and political interaction with both Tehran and Riyadh.

Leonid Issaev is a candidate of Sciences (PhD) in Political Problems of International Relations, Deputy Director of the Centre for Stability and Risk Analysis at the HSE University of Russia.*

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 7-12-2023

Iran, China set to cooperate for peace amid Gaza war

TEHRAN - Beijing says it supports Tehran in its efforts to maintain regional stability, while Iran pledges to strengthen cooperation to address the crisis, the South China Morning Post reported on Wednesday.

Communist Party International Department chief Liu Jianchao met several senior Iranian politicians during his visit to Tehran.

Beijing and Tehran have vowed to support and coordinate with each other diplomatically amid the Israel-Gaza war.

Liu Jianchao met several senior politicians on Tuesday.

They included Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr, Iran's secretary of the Expediency Council, an administrative assembly that plays an advisory role to the head of state, and Ghodrat Ali Heshmatian, the chairman of Iran's House of Parties, a government-funded organization aimed at minimizing differences between the country's registered political parties.

China said it supported Iran in playing its role in maintaining regional peace and stability, while Iran pledged to step up coordination with China on international and regional affairs.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 4-12-2023

India building 1,000MW hydropower project on Chenab

India has right to store 3.6m-acre-feet of water on Pakistan rivers for irrigation purposes

By Khalid Mustafa

ISLAMABAD: India is erecting the first-ever hydropower project on Maru Sadar, the right bank tributary of Chenab River, with live dam storage of 99,000 acre-feet, having capacity to generate 1,000MW hydropower generation.

However, it is pretending that it will have live storage of 88,000 acre-feet with a faulty design of spillways in sheer violation of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) 1960, according to experts. The project will be completed within two years.

But Pakistan has already invoked Article 9 of the Treaty, under Paragraph 11 of Annexure-E, on the project's spillways and free board designs way back one-and-a-half years ago. "We are observing the said project and already raised objections on its design under Article 9. We would again raise the issue under Article 9 of treaty with Indian side at PCIW level talks, which may be held before March 2024," a senior official of PCIW (Pakistan Commissioner for Indus Waters) confirmed to The News.

India, under the Treaty, has the right to store 3.6 million-acre-feet of water on Pakistan rivers for irrigation purposes, and to this effect, it is going to complete the Pakal Dal project with a reservoir of 99,000 acre-feet of water.

Pakistan is of the view that India will have a live storage capacity of 99,000 acre-feet in the Pakal Dal dam and that the quantum of water should be deducted from 3.6 million-acre-feet of its water storage right.

But India, with a faulty design of spillways, wants to pretend since it has a live storage capacity of 88,000 acre-feet, so the volume of 88,000 acre-feet should be deducted from its right of water storage on Pakistan rivers.

If talks under Article 9 fail, the Pakistan side will start exhausting other endeavours mentioned in the Indus Waters Treaty, and after that in case no resolution is attained, Pakistan will be left with no option but to move a court of arbitration on the particular project.

Pakistan and India are currently fighting a legal battle in the topmost platforms of Neutral Expert (NE) and Court of Arbitration (CoA) at The Hague on faulty designs of 330MW Kishenganga erected on the Jehlum River and Ratle Hydropower project being constructed on the Chenab River.

Meanwhile, India has expedited its construction work for two more projects – the Kiru and Kwar projects upstream Ratle project on the Chenab River with designs that are in sheer breach of provisions of the Indus Waters Treaty 1960.

Pakistan has objected to the designs of Kiru hydropower project of 624MW and Kwar hydroelectric power project of 540MW in its recent interaction with India at the level of the Permanent Indus Waters Commission (PIWC). India is bound to share the designs of its projects with Pakistan under the Indus Waters Treaty.

The Kiru hydropower project is being built along the Chenab River near the villages of Patharnakki and Kiru, approximately 42 kms from Kishtwar. It will be located between Kirthai-II hydroelectric project to its upstream and the Kwar hydroelectric project to its downstream.

As per India, Kwar is a run-of-river project. The net head of the project will be 56.6 metres. The total number of penstocks, pipes or long channels that carry water down from the hydroelectric reservoir to the turbines inside the actual power station, is expected to be four in number. The penstock length will be 236 metres. The penstock diameter will be 5.65 metres. The project is expected to generate 1,975.54 GWh of electricity. The hydropower project consists of four turbines, each with 135MW nameplate capacity.

"India has shared with us some days back the designs of two more projects that it is planning to construct on the Chenab river upstream Ratle hydropower project," a

senior official of Pakistan's Commission for Indus Waters told The News.

"We have submitted our objections on the designs of both the projects on components which include spillways, freeboard, and pondages. India is repeating the violations of design-related provisions of the Indus Waters Treaty 1960 in the designs of its projects despite Pakistan's repeated objections. Similar faulty designs that have been adopted in the Kishenganga and Ratle projects are being repeated by India in more hydropower projects on Pakistan's rivers," the official added.

Transboundary water expert Engineer Arshad H. Abbasi said that a report recently published by the Ministry of Power India demonstrates the speed at which India is developing dams on the Chenab River. The progress report reveals the rate at which India is finishing the bumper-to-bumper projects along the Transboundary River.

Abbasi, while referring to the report, said India has finished the road construction work while the MAT (miscellaneous area tunnel) excavation was underway. Some 90pc of Power House Cavern's excavation was finished, 15pc of the dam abutment excavation was accomplished, and 84pc of the Power House Access Tunnels excavation was finished. However, Indian environmentalists and local populace forced India to halt this project indefinitely.

The progress report states that 624MW Kiru HEP is anticipated to be finished in early 2024, after 16 months. The Kiru power project will only cost Indian Rupees (IR) 4.27 per unit, in contrast to the high tariff of Pakistani hydropower projects.

On another project, 540MW Kwar Hydropower Project on the same river, work is in full swing. This project will be completed in 2026 after three years. On completion, this project will offer electricity only at the rate of Indian Rupee 4.07 per unit.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 15-12-2023

COAS discusses security issues with Blinken

Anwar Iqbal

WASHINGTON: Chief of Army Staff Gen Asim Munir met US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington on Thursday to discuss regional security, defence cooperation and other key issues.

Gen Munir also met acting Deputy Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland and Deputy National Security Adviser Jonathan Finer during his visit to the US Department of State.

"Pakistan is an important partner, and we engage with a wide range of interlocutors within the Pakistani

government," said a US State Department spokesperson when asked for comments on Secretary Blinken's meeting with the Pakistan army chief.

"We look forward to continuing to partner with Pakistan on regional security and defence cooperation," the spokesperson added.

They discussed "full spectrum of bilateral relations and regional situation", a diplomatic source told *Dawn* when asked for more information about the talks.

The army chief met US Secretary of Defence Lloyd J. Austin on Wednesday and after the meeting the Pentagon issued a brief statement saying that "the two officials discussed recent regional security developments and potential areas for bilateral defence cooperation".

At an earlier briefing, US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller was asked if the United States would conduct drone strikes to suppress the terrorists who were attacking targets inside Pakistan and if this option would be discussed in the army chief's meetings with US officials.

"I'm not going to comment with respect to his meetings, other than that generally speaking we look forward to partnering with the Pakistani government on regional security and defence cooperation," he said.

Responding to the question about drone attacks, he said: "We have taken a number of steps to partner with them this year on anti-terrorism activities" but did not say anything specific about the drones.

On Thursday, the Washington-based *Foreign Policy* magazine noted that the army chief was visiting Washington amidst an unsettled US-Pakistan relationship.

The report also noted that the departure of US forces from Afghanistan in 2021 has left both nations searching for new anchors in their partnership.

Gen Munir, unlike his predecessors, lacks strong ties to the West but emphasises warm officer-to-officer relations, a legacy of US-Pakistan education and training exchanges, the report added.

The report speculated that Gen Munir was seeking friendly relations with Washington motivated by economic concerns, as the United States was Pakistan's top export destination and a crucial aid source.

According to the report, the army chief's visit aims to address shared security concerns, particularly the resurgence of militancy in Pakistan while US priorities focused on the diminished Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) threat in Afghanistan, potentially affecting the incentive for collaboration with Pakistan.

Despite tensions over the expulsion of Afghan refugees from Pakistan, the US and Pakistan may find common ground on non-security issues like humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.

The report claimed that Gen Munir's discussions in Washington could include global conflicts such as Russia's war in Ukraine and the situation in Gaza. Reports suggesting Pakistan's arms support to Ukraine may be addressed, alongside Pakistan's stance on the Palestinian cause, the report added.

The magazine reported that Gen Munir might highlight the army's stabilising role during political turmoil, a point likely met with cautious reception in Washington.

Gen Munir's meetings with key US officials "will play a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of these complex bilateral ties," the report stated.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 4-12-2023

GT Voice: Rubio's call for ban against China-US travel misleading

By Global Times

Further increasing direct flights between China and the US is the common desire of the societies on both sides, but some American politicians seem unwilling to see a restoration of people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. As reported by Reuters, five Republican senators, led by Marco Rubio, on Friday asked US President Joe Biden's administration to impose a China travel ban after an increase in respiratory illnesses reported recently in China.

The number of direct flights may offer a window to observe people-to-people exchanges and cross-border business activity, and is therefore viewed as a barometer of bilateral economic relations. China-US economic ties are built on the basis of mutual benefit, but it is regrettable to see some American politicians unwilling to cherish the economic complementarity. They don't want to see an increase in business and people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. It is these people who are the troublemakers who have kept posing challenges to China-US economic cooperation.

It is not surprising that Rubio, an extreme nationalist and ideological fanatic, tries to make himself the center of attention. He might just be seeking the media limelight with shocking words, aiming at accumulating political capital and building his own anti-China hawkish image. It seems he will not give up using anything as an excuse in his efforts to attack China and undermine China-US relations, no matter how absurd the excuse is, from the so-called national security to the balloon incident in February and the ensuing ill-intentioned US hype over it. This time, the excuse used by Rubio has been changed to "respiratory illnesses," but the purpose was the same - to stigmatize China and harm China-US relations as much as possible.

As reported by the Xinhua News Agency, Mi Feng, a spokesperson with the National Health Commission, told a press conference on November 26 that the recent

respiratory infectious diseases reported in China are mainly due to the influenza virus. It is extremely absurd and malicious for some American politicians to use influenza as a tool to smear China. They may have forgotten that fall and winter are also high seasons for influenza in the US. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the overall burden of influenza in the US for the 2019-20 period was an estimated 35 million flu-related illnesses, 16 million flu-related medical visits, 390,000 flu-related hospitalizations, and 25,000 flu-related deaths.

In the American politicians' geopolitical games, the interests of the US business community and ordinary people have always been sacrificed, with the excuse of not only the so-called national security but also the "respiratory illness" used this time. It also is worth noting that Rubio's call for a China travel ban comes at a time when China-US relations have shown positive signs of stopping a spiral decline and stabilizing, with increased flight frequencies serving as an important area in this regard. If more politicians in the US call for imposing a China travel ban, it will create a toxic political atmosphere and undermine China-US relations. This may be exactly what Rubio wants to see, although it will greatly harm the US economy and the interests of ordinary American people.

In October, the US Department of Transportation said that Chinese airlines could operate 35 weekly round-trip flights after November 9, up from 24. This was highly welcomed by the societies of both China and the US, and it was also one of the achievements of the restoration and strengthening of communications between the two countries' officials.

We should cherish the hard-won situation to further expand cooperation. It requires joint efforts from both sides - not only from China but also from the US.

Many of America's top business leaders, including Tesla CEO Elon Musk, JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon and Starbucks CEO Laxman Narasimhan, visited China this year, a move that was just a microcosm of the huge travel demand between China and the US. Some analysts said the resumption of flights between China and the US is entering an accelerated phase.

However, the faster the resumption of flights between China and the US, the more hysterical some American politicians have become in trying to hinder this process, even calling for imposing a China travel ban. What are the obstacles that hinder the improvement of China-US relations? The answer is not respiratory illnesses reported recently in China, but some American politicians' geopolitical games, which are bringing uncertainty to China-US relations and greatly harming the US economy.

	INTERNAL AFFAIRS			
	Subject	Newspapers/Periodicals	Date	Page
	INDIA SC Verdict on Article 370			
1.	Ahead of Article 370 verdict, J&K cops crack down on social media 'misuse' HT Correspondent	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	11-12-2024	19
2.	J&K didn't retain 'sovereignty' after accession to India By Satya Prakash	The Tribune, Chandigarh	12-12-2024	19
3.	Supreme Court upholds Centre's decision to abrogate Article 370 By Satya Prakash	The Tribune, Chandigarh	12-12-2024	20
4.	Challenging abrogation of Article 370: Timeline of developments in the case - PTI Immediate Reactions	The Tribune, Chandigarh	12-12-2024	20
5.	A death sentence, defeat of the idea of India: Mehbooba Mufti on Supreme Court's verdict on Article 370 - PTI	The Tribune, Chandigarh	12-12-2024	21
6.	Omar Abdullah expresses disappointment over SC verdict on Article 370 By Samaan Lateef	The Tribune, Chandigarh	12-12-2024	22
7.	Supreme Court verdict sad and unfortunate; but we have to accept it: Ghulam Nabi Azad - PTI	The Tribune, Chandigarh	12-12-2024	22
8.	Congress expresses disappointment over Supreme Court's Article 370 verdict By Sanjay K. Jha State Elections	The Telegraph, Kolkata	12-12-2024	22
9.	BJP 3-1 sweep in state polls, bags Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh; Congress gets Telangana - PTI	The Tribune, Chandigarh	4-12-2024	23
10.	How BJP snatched victory in Chhattisgarh from an overconfident Congress By Sushil Trivedi	The Indian Express, New Delhi	4-12-2024	24
11.	An experimental political choice by the Mizo electorate By Kham Khan Political Developments -Post-Elections Updates	The Hindu, Delhi	6-12-2024	25
12.	Mandate for the BJP's politics of aspirations By Kiren Rijju	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	6-12-2024	27

13.	Opposition can't beat the BJP at its own game By Neera Chandhoke	The Tribune, Chandigarh	5-12-2024	28
14.	Sour spot: Editorial on Mamata Banerjee criticising Congress's lack of seat-sharing in Assembly polls BANGLADESH General Elections Update	The Telegraph, Kolkata	7-12-2024	29
15.	30 parties in race for JS; BNP, allies stay away By Mohiuddin Alamgir	The Daily Star, Dhaka	1-12-2024	29
16.	Independents all-time high By Mohiuddin Alamgir and Asifur Rahman	The Daily Star, Dhaka	2-12-2024	30
17.	EC validates 257 candidates, scraps 213 candidacies on last day of hearing By Staff Correspondent SRI LANKA	The Daily Star, Dhaka	15-12-2024	30
18.	A new chapter for the SLPP By Subhadra Deshapriya NEPAL	Sunday Observer, Colombo	10-12-2024	31
19.	Parties gear up for National Assembly election - Post Report	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	10-12-2024	32
20.	UML too hits the campaign trail with an eye on 2027 vote By Binod Ghimire IRAN	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	4-12-2024	33
21.	Iran's parliament approves cooperation bill with Russia - MAS PAKISTAN General Elections Update	Tehran Times, Tehran	4-12-2024	34
22.	No plan to delay polls even after LHC intervention: ECP - Monitoring Desk	The Nation, Islamabad	8-12-2024	34
23.	Elections in Pakistan: EU not sending full election observation mission By Mariana Baabar CHINA	The News, Islamabad	4-12-2024	35
24.	Top CPC meeting charts China's policymaking for 2024; sends strong signal of strengthening economic vitality and confidence By Ma Jingjing, Li Xuanmin and Yin Yeping	Global Times, China	9-12-2024	36

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 11-12-2023

Ahead of Article 370 verdict, J&K cops crack down on social media ‘misuse’

HT Correspondent

The police took action against an alleged rumour-monger in Baramulla district, and against two persons each in central Budgam and Ganderbal districts.

Ahead of the Supreme Court (SC) verdict on Article 370, Jammu and Kashmir Police has launched a campaign against the alleged misuse of social media and booked five people in the past two days for either uploading ‘hateful content’ or spreading rumours.

While police took action against an alleged rumour-monger in north Kashmir’s Baramulla district, legal action was taken against two persons each in central Kashmir’s Budgam and Ganderbal districts.

A police spokesperson said that Baramulla police took action against ‘rumour-mongering’ and booked an alleged ‘provocateur’.

“Baramulla police has initiated legal proceedings against an individual namely Bilal Ahmad Wani, son of Ali Mohd Wani resident of Wani Mohalla Baliharan Pattan, Baramulla district. This action is in response to his uploading of hateful videos on social media platforms, containing inflammatory and seditious statements,” the spokesperson said.

Similarly, the Budgam police took action against two persons for spreading rumours, the police said in a post on X (formerly Twitter)

In Ganderbal district, the police on Sunday initiated legal action against two individuals for uploading and sharing hateful content on social media platforms.

“Waseem Mushtaq Malik, resident of Safapora and Aadil Ahmed Rather, resident of Nunner, Ganderbal, were found involved in spreading hateful content on social media. Under the recently issued order of the district magistrate, legal action has been initiated against both of them,” a police statement said.

The police appealed to people to remain vigilant about the misuse of social media. “Any attempt to vitiate the environment and create issues of public order will be seen seriously and legal action will be taken,” the statement said.

The actions against social media users come after district magistrates and police cautioned against the sharing of militant propaganda or news without verification in the past two weeks, ahead of the verdict of a constitutional bench of SC which will deliver its judgement on Monday on petitions that have challenged the August 2019 abrogation of Article 370 and bifurcation of J&K state into two union territories.

On Thursday, senior superintendent of police (SSP) Baramulla Amod Ashok Nagpure said a ban has been put in place on sharing any post regarding any terrorist organisation on social media or groups, promoting terrorism or communal disharmony.

“Under UAPA and the Indian Penal Code, these things are now illegal and whosoever uses his/her digital devices to share messages of terrorists’ organisations and separatists on social media is committing a crime. We are ready to take action against such persons and social media handles,” he said.

Additional director general of police (ADGP, law and order) Vijay Kumar on Friday chaired a joint meeting of all the district magistrates and SSsP of Kashmir division where the officers shared the field-generated inputs with respect to all the “expectedly emerging situations in view of upcoming events.”

“All the district heads were stressed to keep an eye on the situation and take preventive and punitive actions under the law against those who indulge in mischief, misinformation and misuse of social media. And it was stressed that miscreants and mischievous elements shouldn’t be allowed to vitiate the peace and harmony,” the police spokesman said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-12-2023

J&K didn’t retain ‘sovereignty’ after accession to India

Apex court declares J&K Constitution ‘inoperative, redundant’

Satya Prakash

New Delhi, Maintaining that states have no independent or standalone sovereignty under the constitutional setup, the Supreme Court on Monday ruled that Jammu and Kashmir didn’t retain any sovereignty following its accession to India.

A five-judge Constitution Bench led by CJI DY Chandrachud – which upheld the constitutional changes made in August 2019 that nullified Article 370 of the Constitution – also declared the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir as “inoperative and redundant”.

The Bench noted that “Paragraph 8 of the Instrument of Accession (IoA) executed by Maharaja Hari Singh provided that nothing in the Instrument would affect the continuance of the sovereignty of the Maharaja in and over the state”.

However, “On November 25, 1949, a proclamation was issued for the state of Jammu and Kashmir by Yuvraj Karan Singh. The declaration in this proclamation that the Constitution of India would not only supersede all other constitutional provisions in the state which were inconsistent with it but also abrogate them achieves what would have been attained by an agreement of merger. With the issuance of the proclamation, Paragraph 8 of the Instrument of Accession ceased to be of legal consequence,” it concluded. “The state of Jammu and Kashmir does not retain any element of sovereignty after the execution of the IoA and the issuance of the proclamation dated November 25, 1949, by which the Constitution of India was adopted,” the Bench said.

“The state of Jammu and Kashmir does not have ‘internal sovereignty’ which is distinguishable from the powers and privileges enjoyed by other states in the country. Article 370 was a feature of asymmetric federalism and not sovereignty,” it said.

The proclamation reflected the full and final surrender of sovereignty by J&K, through its sovereign ruler, to India – to her people who were sovereign, it said. “Neither the constitutional setup nor any other factors indicate that the state of J&K retained an element of sovereignty. The Constitution of J&K was only to further define the relationship between the Union of India and J&K. The relationship was already defined by the Instrument of Accession, the proclamation issued by Yuvraj Karan Singh in November 1949 and, more importantly, by the Constitution of India,” the Bench said.

It said there was a clear absence in the Constitution of J&K of a reference to sovereignty. In contrast, the Constitution of India emphasised in its Preamble that the people of India resolved to constitute India into a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic, it noted.

Writing the verdict for himself, Justice Surya Kant and Justice BR Gavai, the CJI said, “After the abrogation of Article 370... and the application of the entirety of the Constitution of India to the state, the Constitution of the state does not fulfil any purpose or serve any function.”

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-12-2023

Supreme Court upholds Centre's decision to abrogate Article 370

Satya Prakash

New Delhi, In a historic verdict, the Supreme Court on Monday upheld the Centre’s decision to abrogate Article 370 of the Constitution that gave a special status to the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir and said “restoration of statehood shall take place at the earliest”.

In a unanimous verdict, a five-judge Constitution Bench led by CJI DY Chandrachud directed the Election Commission to hold elections in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir without waiting for the restoration of statehood by September 30, 2024. The petitioners had challenged abrogation of Article 370 on the grounds that it could not be done without the recommendation of the Jammu and Kashmir Constituent Assembly. They had questioned the validity of splitting of the erstwhile state into two UTs, contending that it was beyond the powers of Parliament under Article 3 of the Constitution.

Writing a 352-page verdict for himself, Justice Surya Kant and Justice BR Gavai, the CJI said Article 370 of the Constitution was a temporary provision and the President had the power to abrogate the provision, which was an interim arrangement due to war conditions in the state. The Bench upheld the validity of both the Constitution orders (CO-272 and CO-273) that

led to abrogation of Article 370 and application of the Constitution of India to Jammu and Kashmir, saying, “The President has the power to issue a notification declaring that Article 370(3) ceases to operate without the recommendation of the Constituent Assembly.”

Noting that the continuous exercise of power under Article 370(1) by the President indicated that the gradual process of constitutional integration was going on, the Bench said, “The declaration issued by the President under Article 370(3) is a culmination of the process of integration and as such is a valid exercise of power. Thus, CO 273 is valid and not mala fide.”

However, it declared ultra vires the use of Article 367 to effect changes in Article 370.

Justice SK Kaul – who wrote a separate verdict – agreed with the CJI while Justice Sanjiv Khanna penned down a three-page concurring opinion. While upholding creation of Ladakh as a separate UT in view of security reasons, the top court left open the legal question as to whether Parliament can completely convert a state into a UT — as opposed to carving out a UT from a state — in view of Solicitor General Tushar Mehta’s statement that the Centre would restore statehood in Jammu and Kashmir.

Abrogation to verdict

Dec 20, 2018 President’s rule imposed in Jammu and Kashmir; extended on July 3, 2019

Aug 5, 2019 Centre abrogates Article 370 provisions giving J&K special status

Aug 6 First plea challenging presidential order filed in SC

Aug 28 Bench refers matter to five-judge Constitution Bench

Sept 19 Constitution Bench set up to hear petitions

March 2, 2020 Apex court refuses to refer batch of petitions to seven-judge Bench

Aug 2, 2023 Top court commences day-to-day hearing

Sept 5 Reserves verdict on 23 pleas after 16 days of hearing

Dec 11 SC upholds govt decision to abrogate Article 370

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-12-2023

Challenging abrogation of Article 370:

Timeline of developments in the case

Supreme Court upholds abrogation of Article 370, calls for polls by September next year

PTI

New Delhi, Following is the timeline of events in a case in which the Supreme Court on Monday upheld the government's decision to abrogate Article 370 of the Constitution.

December 20, 2018: President's Rule imposed while exercising powers under Article 356 of the Constitution

in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Subsequently extended on July 3, 2019.

August 5, 2019: Centre abrogates the provisions of Article 370, bestowing a special status upon the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir.

August 6, 2019: First petition challenging the presidential order scrapping Article 370 filed by advocate ML Sharma, who was later joined by another lawyer from Jammu and Kashmir, Shakir Shabir.

August 10, 2019: National Conference, a prominent political party from Jammu and Kashmir, files a petition contending that the changes brought in the status of the state had taken away the rights of its citizens without their mandate.

August 24, 2019: Press Council of India moves the Supreme Court supporting the Centre and Jammu and Kashmir administration's decision to impose restrictions on communications.

August 28, 2019: Supreme Court issues notices to the Centre, Jammu and Kashmir administration on a plea moved by Kashmir Times editor for the removal of the restrictions imposed on journalists.

August 28, 2019: A bench headed by then Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi refers matter to five-judge Constitution bench.

September 19, 2019: Supreme Court sets up five-judge Constitution bench to hear pleas challenging abrogation of Article 370.

March 2, 2020: Supreme Court declines to refer to larger seven-judge bench batch of petitions challenging constitutional validity of Centre's decision to abrogate provisions of Article 370.

April 25, 2022: Supreme Court agrees to consider listing after summer vacation pleas challenging Centre's decision to abrogate provisions of Article 370 after one of the petitioners seeks urgent hearing in view of delimitation exercise being carried out in Jammu and Kashmir.

July 11, 2023: Supreme Court says it will commence day-to-day hearing from August 2 on petitions challenging abrogation of Article 370.

August 2, 2023: Supreme Court commences hearing on petitions challenging abrogation of Article 370.

September 5, 2023: Court reserves verdict on 23 petitions in the matter after hearing those for 16 days.

December 11, 2023: Supreme Court upholds government's decision to abrogate Article 370, says steps should be taken to conduct election to Assembly in Union Territory by September 30 next year.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-12-2023

A death sentence, defeat of the idea of India: Mehbooba Mufti on Supreme Court's verdict on Article 370

Mufti urges people of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh not to be disheartened or lose hope

PTI

Srinagar, People's Democratic Party (PDP) chief Mehbooba Mufti on Monday said the Supreme Court's (SC) decision to uphold Article 370 abrogation is "nothing less than a death sentence", adding that it marked the defeat of the idea of India with which the Muslim-majority state had acceded in 1947.

"Today an unconstitutional and illegal act that took place in the Parliament was declared legal. It is nothing less than a death sentence not only for Jammu and Kashmir but for the idea of India," Mufti said in a five-minute video message she posted on X.

"The SC has said that the Article 370 is temporary, which is why it was removed. This is not only our defeat but also the defeat of the idea of India. This is the defeat of the imagination of India, the Gandhian India with which Muslims of Jammu and Kashmir, rejecting Pakistan, joined hands with the Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Christians, the country of Gandhi. Today marks the defeat of that idea of India," she added.

The former chief minister urged the people of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh not to be disheartened or lose hope over the apex court's decision.

"Don't lose heart, don't lose hope. Jammu and Kashmir has seen a lot of ups and downs. The SC verdict today is a halt; it is not our destination. Don't make the mistake of considering it as the end. Our opponents want us to lose hope and accept defeat. But that should not be the case," she said.

The PDP president said the struggle in Jammu and Kashmir was a political fight which has been going on for decades.

"No decision is final, not even the SC's decision. This is a political fight which has been going on for many decades. Our people have made sacrifices and we will not quit halfway," she said.

Mufti said the SC declaring the Article 370 as a temporary provision of the constitution has strengthened the forces who claim that the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India is temporary.

"In 1947, there was a government, a Parliament and a constitution was made. Promises were made to the people of Jammu and Kashmir and a special status was granted. After 77 years, another party came which harped on removing Article 370 when they came to power and they did it. It is not our defeat but the defeat of the country. They have betrayed us, we did not."

"Today, they have weakened the country by declaring Article 370 as temporary. They have strengthened those forces in Jammu and Kashmir who have been claiming

that the accession with India is temporary. The hand which had joined you with hopes, you have injured that hand today. So do not lose hope, this time shall also pass," Mufti said.

The PDP chief urged people in other parts of the country not to celebrate the abrogation of Article 370 as she warned that the ruling party at the Centre will not stop at it.

"...What has started in Jammu and Kashmir will spread to other parts of the country. They will not waste much time in snatching from you the Constitution and the tricolour under which we fought for and won our freedom. At that time, we will not celebrate but we will pray that you will counter them with courage," she said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-12-2023

Omar Abdullah expresses disappointment over SC verdict on Article 370

The Supreme Court, in its judgement on Monday, supports the government's decision to revoke Article 370

Samaan Lateef

Srinagar, Former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Omar Abdullah voiced his disappointment on Monday following the Supreme Court's decision to uphold the central government's move to abrogate Article 370.

Omar expressed disappointment on X, saying, "Disappointed but not disheartened. The struggle will continue. It took the BJP decades to reach here. We are also prepared for the long haul. We shall overcome. #Article370," in a post on X.

The Supreme Court, in its judgment on Monday, supported the government's decision to revoke Article 370, which granted special status to the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Omar and former chief minister Mehbooba Mufti were reportedly placed under house arrest on Monday ahead of the court's verdict on a series of petitions challenging the abrogation of Article 370.

The People's Democratic Party (PDP) made the announcement, asserting that police had sealed the doors of Mehbooba Mufti's residence even before the Supreme Court could pronounce its judgment.

However, Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha countered the claim, asserting that no individuals had been subjected to house arrest.

In response, Omar Abdullah took to X, posting, "Dear Mr. LG, these chains that have been put on my gate have not been put by me, so why are you denying what your police force has done. It's also possible you don't even know what your police are doing? Which one is it? Are you being dishonest, or is your police acting independently of you?"

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-12-2023

Supreme Court verdict sad and unfortunate; but we have to accept it:

Ghulam Nabi Azad

Says the people of the region are not happy with the verdict

PTI

Srinagar, Democratic Progressive Azad Party (DPAP) chairman Ghulam Nabi Azad on Monday termed the Supreme Court's verdict on pleas challenging the abrogation of the provisions of Article 370 of the Constitution "sad and unfortunate", but said "we have to accept it".

"It (the court verdict) is sad and unfortunate," Azad told reporters here.

The former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister said the people of the region are not happy with the verdict delivered by a five-judge bench of the apex court.

"But we have to accept it (the verdict)," he added.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 12-12-2023

Congress expresses disappointment over Supreme Court's Article 370 verdict

People want democracy, not autocracy. You have strangled the democratic impulses of the people: Abhishek Manu Singhvi

Sanjay K. Jha, New Delhi

The Congress on Monday expressed "disappointment" over the Supreme Court's reluctance to decide on the dismemberment of Jammu and Kashmir, and said it respectfully disagreed with the judgment on how Article 370 was abrogated.

However, the party contested the propaganda that it intended to restore Article 370 to the Constitution.

Addressing the media for the party, senior leaders and lawyers P. Chidambaram and Abhishek Singhvi said everyone was bound by the court verdict.

The emphasis was on immediate restoration of statehood and the conduct of elections.

Singhvi said: "For how long does the central government intend to rule the state by remote control? What's the fear? There is a contradiction in the Supreme Court verdict. While it says they won't decide on the validity of the decision to break the state into Union Territories, declaring it an open case, they justified the declaration of Ladakh as a Union Territory."

Explaining the contradiction, Singhvi said: "Under Article 3 of the Constitution, the Centre can carve out a portion of the state as a Union Territory. But you can't reduce the entire state to different Union Territories. The Supreme Court refused to go into this because of an assurance that the statehood would be restored. This is a constitutional anomaly. The statehood could have been restored by now. People want democracy, not autocracy."

You have strangled the democratic impulses of the people.”

Singhvi said the Modi government need not wait for the outer limit set by the Supreme Court — September 24 — for holding elections because the state has not seen an elected government for a long time. He also pointed to the abnormal unemployment rate of 18 per cent in Kashmir, apart from other economic indicators suggesting a downslide.

Chidambaram also countered the Centre’s claim of improved security by underlining that terror attacks and killings of security force personnel and civilians continued.

Arguing that the detailed judgment needed careful examination, Chidambaram said: “The judgment in the cases concerning the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution has decided many issues but has left open some issues that are also vitally important. It has also held as ultra vires the manner in which Article 367 was invoked to amend part of Article 370. Prima facie, we respectfully disagree with the judgment on the manner in which Article 370 was abrogated.”

Reiterating the resolution passed at the Congress working committee after the removal of Article 370 in Parliament, Chidambaram said: “Article 370 deserved to be honoured until it was amended strictly in accordance with the Constitution of India. We are also disappointed that the Supreme Court did not decide the question of dismembering the state and reducing its status to two Union Territories. That question has been reserved for adjudication in a suitable case in the future.”

He added: “The Congress has always demanded the restoration of full statehood for what has become the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. We welcome the Supreme Court’s verdict in this regard. Full statehood must be restored immediately. The aspirations of the people of Ladakh must also be fulfilled. We welcome the court’s direction to hold Assembly elections. However, we believe that the elections should be held immediately and there is no reason to wait until 30.09.2024. Since accession, Jammu & Kashmir was — and is — an integral part of India. The people of Jammu and Kashmir are Indian citizens. We reiterate our resolve to work for the security, peace, development and progress of Jammu and Kashmir.”

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 4-12-2023

BJP 3-1 sweep in state polls, bags

Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan,

Chhattisgarh; Congress gets Telangana

Suspense mounts as to who will be BJP’s chief minister in any of three Hindi heartland states

PTI

New Delhi, The BJP swept Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh on Sunday inflicting a resounding

defeat on the Congress to tighten its stranglehold in the Hindi heartland, in a big boost for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and setting the tone for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

In some consolation for the Congress in the face of the saffron wave after it lost Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, the party ousted the Bharat Rashtra Samiti (BRS) in Telangana to make it 3-1 for the Bharatiya Janata Party(BJP) in the latest round of Assembly elections billed as a semi-final before next year’s poll showdown. Counting of votes in Mizoram will be taken up on Monday.

As the BJP leadership savoured the triple victory just months after losing its lone southern citadel Karnataka, Prime Minister Modi said some people are already saying that the party’s hat-trick in the states is a guarantee of hat-trick in the Lok Sabha polls.

“The results show popular support for our battle against corruption,” Modi told a crowd of cheering supporters at the BJP headquarters here, adding that they have served a lesson to the Congress and the opposition’s INDIA bloc that merely collecting some dynasts on a dais may make for a good photograph but cannot win people’s confidence.

Voters have delivered a warning to these parties involved in corruption to mend their ways or people will finish them off, he said.

“We bow to the Janta Janardan. The results in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan indicate that the people of India are firmly with politics of good governance and development, which the @BJP4India stands,” Modi earlier said in a post on X, after a ringing endorsement of the BJP’s strategy centred on the prime minister’s appeal and governance plank.

Ruling MP for 18 years, a well entrenched BJP managed to stave off anti-incumbency in a shot in the arm for four-time chief minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan and dashing the hopes of a resurgent Congress helmed by veteran and former CM Kamal Nath.

Winning 141 seats and leading in 24, the BJP got a simple majority and could get two-thirds majority in a House of 230. Congress bagged 45 and was leading in 19.

Suspense also mounted as to who will be the BJP’s chief minister in any of the three Hindi heartland states.

Clouds of gulal, shouts of Jai Shri Ram, joyful jigs and crackers were the sights and sounds of celebration in BJP offices with party workers and leaders unanimous in attributing the win to Modi’s “guarantees”.

“The election results show people accept Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s guarantee of delivering on guarantees,” BJP leader and Union Minister Pralhad Joshi said.

Modi turned on the heat on the Congress over its poll guarantees by projecting himself as a leader who has delivered on the promises made by him to help the common man meet his aspirations.

“Modi Yaani Har Guarantee Poori Hone Ki Guarantee (Modi means the guarantee to fulfill every guarantee),” he had said in an article last week.

Free food grain, income assistance for farmers, housing for all, 100 per cent electrification of villages, and tap water to every home, were listed by the BJP as some of Modi’s guarantees in Chhattisgarh.

After the Congress’ loss in three key states, rumblings have surfaced in the opposition bloc INDIA ahead of their meeting on December 6, with many leaders claiming that the grand old party ignored others, but was unable to win elections on its own.

The loss for Congress, which made a loud pitch for caste census and adopted a soft Hindutva approach, also appeared to weaken its position in the INDIA bloc where party equations could change, as other opposition parties may no longer consider it as the fulcrum of the opposition alliance.

“The poll results show the defeat of the Congress and the victory of the BJP. The Congress ignored other INDIA parties, but was unable to win on its own,” said JD(U) leader K C Tyagi.

With BJP dislodging the Congress hit by factionalism in Rajasthan, the desert state stuck to a nearly 30-year-old ‘rivaz’ (tradition) of not voting an incumbent party back to power. The BJP got a majority bagging 115 seats after voting was held for 199 constituencies. The Congress notched 69 seats. The Chhattisgarh outcome was a surprise for many Congress leaders who were hoping for another stint in power in the state by fending off the BJP challenge.

The day began with both parties neck and neck but, as counting continued, the BJP consolidated its lead and won or was ahead in 54 seats. The Congress won or was ahead in 35 seats in the 90-member house.

The K Chandrashekhar Rao-led BRS hoped for a hat-trick in Telangana but was dethroned by the Congress. Anumula Revanth Reddy, a Lok Sabha MP who led the Congress’ charge, could be the second chief minister of the state.

The Congress won 61 seats and was leading in three in the 119-member House. The BRS bagged 33 and was ahead in six.

The BJP put up a good showing and increased its tally in the southern state with the victory of its candidate K Venkata Ramana Reddy in Kamareddy against both the outgoing chief minister KCR and Revanth Reddy, who is the TPCC chief, being the highlight. KCR and Revanth Reddy, however, won from Gajwel and Kodangal constituencies respectively. BJP won 8 seats, up from one seat, and doubled its vote share from the 2018 polls to nearly 14 per cent.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah said the Assembly results have proved that the days of appeasement and caste politics are over and that ‘new India’ votes on politics of performance.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said the party will overcome temporary setbacks and prepare fully for the Lok Sabha polls along with its partners in the INDIA alliance.

“Congress’ performance in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan assembly polls disappointing,” he said.

Basking in his hour of glory, Chief Minister Chouhan said the state government implemented schemes like the Ladli Lakshmi and Ladli Behna and a lot of work was done for the welfare of farmers, poor people and youth.

“Our Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji is in the hearts of the people of Madhya Pradesh. The state is also in the heart of Modi ji.”

Taking a swipe at Gehlot, born into a family of magicians, Union minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat said the magic has ended and people in Rajasthan have voted for the honour of women and for the welfare of the poor.

The BJP amplified its pitch around the prime minister during the Assembly polls as its manifestoes featured his guarantees, with Modi crisscrossing the poll-bound states, except for Mizoram, to seek popular support to deliver on his welfare and development promises.

Modi addressed 14 rallies each in Rajasthan and MP and five in Chhattisgarh after the polls were announced. He held two massive roadshows in Rajasthan and one in MP and his entries in many of rally venues were marked by a drive through cheering supporters.

The extent of the party’s win in Chhattisgarh and MP has taken even some of its leaders by surprise, as most exit polls gave the Congress an edge in the former and were mixed in their forecast for the latter.

A campaign devised by its central leadership with Home Minister Shah focussing more on MP and Chhattisgarh worked like a magic, party leaders said.

Together, the five states have 84 Lok Sabha seats - MP with 29, Chhattisgarh 11, Rajasthan 25, Telangana 17 and Mizoram two.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 4-12-2023

How BJP snatched victory in Chhattisgarh from an overconfident Congress

Sushil Trivedi

At the time of writing this article, it is certain that the BJP is set to form the government in Chhattisgarh. Most of the exit polls indicated a comfortable return of the Congress party. Congress was so sure of its victory that its slogan was “abki bar, 75 par” — indicating that it would get more than 75 seats. The BJP was not expecting a clear verdict in its favour and was also surprised by the outcome of the election. It is a different point that now the BJP leaders may claim that they were always sure of a success of this magnitude.

The Chhattisgarh Vidhan Sabha has 90 seats, of which 29 are reserved for Scheduled Tribes and 10 for Scheduled Castes. During the Vidhan Sabha Elections in 2018, Congress had unexpectedly won 68 seats and the BJP, after ruling the state for 15 years, had won only 15. Congress had grabbed 26 ST and seven SC seats — remarkably, it won 11 out of 12 seats in the tribal-dominated and Naxal violence-affected Bastar region and all 14 seats in the tribal Surguja region. It may be noted that the Congress had won all the by-elections held in the state after December 2018 and at the time of going into the contest in 2023, the effective strength of the Congress had risen to 71 seats, while that of the BJP had dwindled to 13 seats. But now, some ministers of the Baghel Cabinet have lost the elections.

Since 2018, the state Congress, under the leadership of Bhupesh Baghel, has rejuvenated the organisation and set up an agenda for socio-economic reform. The Baghel model of giving a boost to the rural economy, promising higher MSP for paddy and minor forest produces, and creating an independent identity for Chhattisgarh, created a strong mood in favour of the party. While Congress was in electoral preparedness mode from day one, the state BJP, after its previous humiliating defeat, and marginalisation by its high command, was almost absent. Political analysts were unanimously giving the thumbs up to the Congress.

However, the central leadership of the BJP and its election juggernaut swung into action just before the polls. The Prime Minister visited the state at least eight times, held rallies and addressed huge public meetings. A horde of central ministers and BJP chief ministers camped in the state for many weeks to lead the election campaign. The BJP, sensing the mood of the rural electorate, promised higher MSP for paddy and announced a much higher price for purchase and bonus arrears to the farmers for the years 2013 and 2014. Most importantly, it announced a scheme to pay Rs 12,000 per year to married women. Acting quickly, it got forms filled by women for this scheme. The Congress realised the effectiveness of the BJP's announcements and immediately announced a still higher purchase price for paddy, a loan waiver scheme for farmers and a scheme to pay Rs 15,000 per year to all the women without any discrimination. The BJP, surprisingly, brought back all the senior state leaders to the party forum and gave the tickets at the last hour. This strategy worked well.

This time, the BJP has performed exceedingly well in Bastar and has swept polls in Surguja. It shows that its strategy of wooing the tribals has succeeded on two counts. Firstly, it was able to convince the tribals of better protection and support under the BJP regime, and second, it succeeded in polarising the community in the tribal area. It was able to secure the support of Scheduled Castes and OBC voters.

The BJP played a very effective game of supporting smaller regional parties. It was expected that these parties would grab a portion of the SC and ST votes, supposedly the vote bank of the Congress. The BJP also tried to get some support from a section of disillusioned converted tribals. And no doubt, these smaller parties helped in the division of Congress votes, adversely affecting its prospects.

The BJP did not rely much on a hard Hindutva campaign in the state, but it worked hard to foment polarisation in some areas with success. Congress, earlier in the soft Hindutva mode, stressed mostly on rural development and regional identity during the election campaign. It was sure that there was no anti-incumbency — this is mainly responsible for its downfall.

The writer, a political analyst, is former state election commissioner Chhattisgarh

THE HINDU, DELHI 6-12-2023

An experimental political choice by the Mizo electorate

The remarkable electoral success of the Zoram People's Movement highlights an undercurrent of electoral transformation in Mizoram

Kham Khan, Suan Hausing

The ninth Mizoram Assembly election results, 2023, mark both a continuity and a change in Mizoram's electoral politics. Like in the past, this election not only leveraged a multiparty electoral contest within the framework of what Balveer Arora in a different context calls the 'binodal' system but also ensured that the Mizo National Front (MNF) lost after a term in power. In other words, this system perpetuates a system of a 'revolving door' wherein an alternate party has come to power in every one or two-election cycle since 1987. The impressive win by the Zoram People's Movement (ZPM), a regionalist party formed in 2017 and registered with the Election Commission of India barely four years ago — it won 27 seats and an over 37% vote share — is a spectacular improvement from its tally of eight seats and a 22% vote share in 2018. This marks a break from the past.

An interesting break from the past

Unlike in the past, where the binodal electoral contest was always between a national party and regionalist parties, this election pivoted around a contest between two rival regionalist parties, i.e., the ZPM and the MNF. The Congress was reduced to a status of a bit player and managed to get just one seat out of the 40 seats being contested. Yet, the Congress's ability to retain a 20.8% vote share suggests the fluid possibilities of a binodal electoral contest in the future. Again, unlike the past

where Mizoram broadly follows the ‘small State syndrome’ where a similar party or a party in coalition with the party-in-power at the Centre is voted to power in a State because of its dependence on the Centre’s financial largesse, this election defies this and marks an experimental political choice by Mizo electorates by ensuring the ZPM’s victory. This presents an interesting electoral puzzle.

Under this rubric, the way the ZPM managed to penetrate and consolidate its electoral purchase across the State is remarkable given that Mizoram’s electoral landscape is marked by a fairly stable party support-base. While the saliency of anti-incumbency against the MNF after being in power for a term is apparent, a key explanation to this is the emergence of a new opportunity structure opened by the diminished electoral appeal of the Congress. In this sense, Mizoram follows a similar pattern of electoral contests between regionalist parties that was set by Nagaland since 2013. The failure of the Congress to promote popular and charismatic leaders such as S.C. Jamir in Nagaland post the election in 2013, and Lal Thanhawla in Mizoram since this election have important bearings on its electoral purchase. The electoral space vacated by the Congress in Mizoram is apparent (it struggled to secure a seat and was in a distant second position in six constituencies). The only exception is the Thorang constituency where Zodintluanga Ralte, a Congress candidate, lost by a whisker of 62 votes against his MNF counterpart, R. Rohmingliana.

The ZPM’s strategy

Against this backdrop, the ZPM successfully presents itself as a viable and attractive electoral alternative to the MNF for efficient and ‘corruption-free’ governance. By fielding a mixture of experienced, educated and star-packed candidates including Lalduhoma (a former decorated Indian Police Service officer who effectively used his proximity to the Gandhi family and central political leaders in the 1980s to broker peace in Mizoram), Jeje Lalpekhlua (national football player), Baryl Vanneihsangi (radio jockey and municipal councillor), and Vanlalsailova (gospel singer who eventually lost by 292 votes), the party could effectively send out the right political vibes to the electorate.

In a regionalist space where ethnicity, development and governance issues overlap across parties, the ZPM skilfully projected its commitment to promote the Zo nationalist cause and aspirations and wove these together with a vision of governance reform and development initiatives. Although Mr. Lalduhoma does not articulate Zo nationalism and aspirations with a rhetorical flourish like Mr. Zoramthanga, his stellar commitment and association with the Zo nationalist cause under the banner of the Action for Peace Committee (1986), the Zoram Nationalist Party (Mizo National Front (Nationalist) since 1997), and now the

ZPM, is seen by many as genuine and an invaluable asset — a reward and recognition for what is long overdue.

Apparently, the ZPM’s promise for minimum support price for rural cash crops such as broom grass, chillis, ginger, and turmeric has also gained electoral traction as over 60% of the Mizo continue to rely on agricultural income. This becomes compelling especially in light of recent reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India exposing the inefficacy and irregularities in the rural development programme under the New Land Use Policy launched by the Congress (and replicated by the MNF without much success). These reports and the continued precarity of farmers’ economy in rural Mizoram was effectively used by the ZPM to galvanise a groundswell of support for its pet development project aimed at alleviating poverty and raising rural income.

The ZPM’s subtle political messaging to arraign the MNF for its alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party and the latter’s failure to protect Christian minorities and Zo (Kuki-Zomi) people in Manipur since the outbreak of violence from May 3 seem to have worked in its favour. Indubitably, this has helped the ZPM in neutralising the MNF’s attempt to electorally appropriate the protection and rehabilitation it extended to over 40,000 Chin refugees who fled from the February 2021 military coup de etat in Myanmar, and over 12,000 Zo (Kuki-Zomi) internally displaced persons from Manipur’s violence since early May.

The Opposition cannot be taken for granted

The remarkable electoral success of the ZPM certainly presents an undercurrent of electoral transformation in Mizoram which simultaneously leverages continuity and a subtle yet definitive break with the past. Although the resounding loss of the MNF is apparent in the convincing defeat of Zoramthanga and Tawnluia, the topmost leaders, and the 10 seats it managed to secure, Mizoram’s binodal electoral landscape is likely to remain fluid as the MNF continues to enjoy an over 35% vote share and manage a second place in 28 constituencies.

Given the considerable electoral support the Congress and the MNF enjoy in the State, the nature of the electoral contest will largely be a function of the ability of these parties to revive their organisation and inculcate popular leaders beyond Lal Thanhawla and Zoramthanga. Till then the jury is out if Mr. Lalduhoma, the incumbent Chief Minister, will successfully harness his previously rich experience to forge a new equation or tacit agreement with the BJP at the Centre in ways which help steer Mizoram as an autonomous ‘corruption-free’ State.

Kham Khan Suan Hausing is Professor of Political Science at the University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 6-12-2023

Mandate for the BJP's politics of aspirations

Kiren Rijju

*2024 presents the Congress another opportunity to
course correct and if they don't, it will be too late*

While addressing a buoyant audience at the BJP headquarters after the party won in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi clearly said that the youth of India wants development to be the driving agenda. His address underscored the importance of ensuring that our politics revolves around questions of development and not other distractions. It would be wise if the Congress and their alliance partners paid heed to this advice and ceased to be divisive, parochial, casteist and communal in their politics. If they continue in the same course, they will slide to even further irrelevance.

Let me begin with the Opposition's most recent folly first. As soon as it became clear that the Congress was getting routed in the northern states and was just about winning in Telangana (more thanks to the anger against the BRS as opposed to any love for the Congress), Congress leaders and strategists tried to make it a "North Versus South" debate. This is not only preposterous but also factually flawed — the BJP has more MPs from southern India than the Congress. The BJP is also a part of the government in Puducherry. At the start of the current calendar year, the Congress had no government in South India. In Telangana, the BJP has doubled its vote share and established itself as a key player in over 60 seats in the state, a marked improvement from 2014 and 2018. For the record, the Congress has zero MLAs in Andhra Pradesh and has been out of power in Tamil Nadu for the last five decades.

But, one should not be surprised at this negative politics of the Congress. Throughout the campaign, the Congress brought out the absolute worst in themselves, lowering electoral discourse to a point that can't be imagined. Thankfully, the wisdom of the people ensured that their lies had no takers.

The Congress tried to play a very dangerous game of creating caste wars in India, especially in northern India. Their leaders suddenly started speaking about injustice to the Other Backward Classes (doesn't matter that Congress was the one opposing the Mandal Commission) including concocting facts that never existed. The OBC community naturally had better wisdom: The fact that Narendra Modi is from an OBC background was not missed by the people. They also saw through the inability of the Congress to give any respect to OBC leaders in their party.

In parallel, the Congress began to talk about the caste census as a ploy to provoke even more social tensions. Unfortunately for them, the people of India trusted PM

Modi, who said that if there is one caste that needs attention it is poverty. The numbers indicate the comprehensive rejection of Congress' casteist politics — the BJP scored big in SC and ST seats. In Bastar, Chhattisgarh's ST belt, the Congress faced a defeat.

The Congress was working on another strategy as well — to abuse sanatana dharma. They used one of their ally's shoulders to fire from. Their ally also fully obliged, abusing and mocking sanatana dharma. As a proud Indian, it was disgusting to hear this but the anger to such statements spread faster than one can imagine. People began to condemn the statement but more than that, they were questioning the silence of the Congress on these statements. People were seeing this silence as support and decided that we would punish such devious communal politics.

There are other lessons as well. The success of the BJP, powered by PM Modi's connect with the masses has shown that one does not need to make unreasonable promises to succeed. In his entire political career, PM Modi has never made promises that are unbelievable and undeliverable. For instance, in the 2012 Gujarat elections, the Congress came up with a housing scheme, made demo houses and distributed forms. PM Modi refused to get drawn into such discourse. He won the elections. When Congress came up with the fiscally unreasonable Nyay Scheme, PM Modi did not take the bait, preferring to focus on his track record in office. He won in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls too.

The people are not believing the fake promises of Congress — the people of Chhattisgarh, MP and Rajasthan saw how the promise of a loan waiver was never fulfilled between 2018 and 2023. Today, the people of Karnataka are suffering thanks to the exaggerated guarantees of the Congress — power bills are up, so are power cuts, and infra projects are suffering. Within six months, the cookie has crumbled. In contrast, the people of India fully trust that Modi's guarantee is that he will fulfil all the promises he has made. The people of India believe that when they lose hope from others, that is where Modi's guarantee begins.

Today's India is an aspirational society. It is aspirational because the nation finally has a government that is not bogged down by the constraints of the past but is looking ahead towards creating a brighter future; there is a government that is betting on India's youth and Indian talent. Gone are the days when those in power would take guests on poverty tourism. Today's India engages with the world as an equal and is eager to contribute to global well-being. In such an India, the Congress' politics is outdated. And, that is also the reason the Congress is getting extinct in state after state. It is also the reason why Congress is unable to get its governments re-elected. 2024 presents another opportunity for them to course correct and if they don't,

it will be too late. India has moved on and it prefers the Modi way of working.

Kiren Rijju is Union minister of Earth Sciences.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 5-12-2023

Opposition can't beat the BJP at its own game

The INDIA bloc has to come up with an alternative agenda focusing on redistributive justice, not on a handout here or there.

Neera Chandhoke
Political scientist

THE results of the Assembly elections (barring Telangana) have given a nasty shock to the Congress. It has lost Rajasthan as well as Chhattisgarh and suffered a debacle in Mizoram. The outcome in Madhya Pradesh was on expected lines; the state seems to have become another Hindutva stronghold. The Congress should have learnt a lesson: no party can afford to re-enact the BJP's agenda. When it comes to politicisation of Hinduism, no one can beat the Hindutva Parivar. Cadres of the RSS have a presence in virtually every neighbourhood in major parts of north India. They have understood the importance of the notion of biradari/community and inserted themselves into the lives of people.

History has shown us that the only way a right-wing divisive agenda can be countered is by an alternative agenda of social transformation. Eminent literary critic Terry Eagleton reminds us that we cannot foretell the future. We can only warn that unless we feed the hungry and welcome the immigrant, we might not have a future at all. He says Karl Marx believed that the best a revolutionary could do was to describe the conditions under which a different sort of future might be possible. We must engage critically with what is around us to create conditions for a better future. The INDIA bloc has to counter the agenda of politicised religion, personalised 'welfare' schemes, intolerance towards dissenters, the might of the coercive arm of the state and denial of civil liberties. An alternative agenda has to think of redistributive justice based on employment generation and progressive taxation, not on a handout here or there. It has to relentlessly draw attention to the extent of poverty in the country.

If the Prime Minister has extended free ration to 81 crore Indians for another five years, imagine how much poverty and deprivation these citizens are mired in. This government is not statistic-friendly, and we do not know what the extent of poverty is, or even what poverty line the government subscribes to. But if India ranks 111th out of 125 countries on the Global Hunger Index, crores of our people live below the line of a decent standard of living. The Opposition alliance has to focus on systemic issues, not on attacking an industrialist. Poverty and ill-being are not due to one man's riches; they are the outcome of a deeply inequalitarian society. They are the

outcome of a society indifferent to equality or to the promise of a life worth living for all.

The alternative agenda must emphasise the need for a compassionate and responsive leadership, restoration of the prestige of damaged institutions and the significance of appropriate political language. The 'welfare state', social scientists have concluded, is debatable, because it is compatible with a high degree of inequality. The discourse has to shift to social democracy — redistribution, participation and ensuring rights to basic services, freedom, equality, justice and fraternity.

Above all, the Opposition must foreground the need to value the Constitution. We live in a deeply polarised society. Independent India inherited a fractured land and a divided people. History bore witness to the fact that the nation takes precedence over solidarity. At that time, the Constitution played an important role in forging a political community.

The Partition had split the political community and drowned India in a vortex of violence. The task the Constitution-makers had on their hands was an onerous one. Indians spoke different languages, practised distinctive rituals, possessed unique world views and had diverse expectations of politics. A newly independent India strained at the seams with diversity and difference, both of which can be troublesome categories. People were strangers to each other. And in many parts, democracy was a stranger to them. Social hierarchies were left intact, elites continued to hold themselves about the rest of the people and discrimination on the grounds of religion and caste was rife. Independence had come along with bloodshed.

The miracle is that a democratic Constitution was written amidst the debris of destroyed homes, workplaces and places of worship.

After the freedom struggle, progressive poets wrote inspiring lyrics that transcended religious boundaries to focus on commonalities. Barsaat ki Raat (1960), a film directed by PL Santoshi, featured a qawwali, 'Yeh ishq ishq hai, ishq ishq...', whose lyrics were written by Sahir Ludhianvi. Its high point was the line: 'Ishq azaad hai, Hindu na Mussalman hai ishq/aap hi dharam hai and aap hi imaan hai ishq' (Love is free, neither Hindu nor Muslim, it is in itself dharma and belief). For Dharmputra (1961), produced by BR Chopra, Sahir wrote the lyrics of another famous qawwali: 'Kaabe mein raho ya Kashi mein, nisbat to usiki baat se hai, tum Ram kaho yah Rahim kaho, maqsad to usiki zaat se hai' (Whether you live in Kaaba or Kashi, you are concerned with one God, whether you call him Ram or Rahim).

Without progressive poets, literary figures and filmmakers, the task of creating a political community through a democratic Constitution would have been abandoned. Indians have to be reminded of this task. Is INDIA capable of restoring the lost virtue of solidarity with the vulnerable people and changing the terms of

engagement? Or will it lose its relevance amid political wrangling? We will find out in due course.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 7-12-2023

Sour spot: Editorial on Mamata Banerjee criticising Congress's lack of seat-sharing in Assembly polls

INDIA needs to examine whether one of its principal electoral themes for the elections, the caste census, which is curated towards disadvantaged social groups, is yielding political dividends

The knives are out for the Congress — from its allies. After its electoral debacle in the three heartland states, the meeting of the INDIA bloc, scheduled for yesterday, had to be postponed given the 'unavailability' of some key leaders. Worse, there has been a perceptible effort among the Congress's alliance partners to distance the coalition from the electoral outcome: Mamata Banerjee dubbed the results as a defeat for the Congress. There are reasons for this grouse. The Congress, quite deservedly, stands accused of not being amenable to the demand of tactical seat-sharing with allies or inviting them for a joint campaign in this round of electoral contests. Ms Banerjee recently argued that a timely seat-sharing formula could have reversed the results.

It would be interesting to examine Ms Banerjee's claim in light of the data of voting patterns among specific demographic constituencies. Reports suggest that in Madhya Pradesh, the Bharatiya Janata Party won 26 seats reserved for the scheduled castes, while the Congress won 9; in Chhattisgarh, even though the BJP won fewer SC constituencies than the Congress, it managed to double its count; in Rajasthan, the BJP won 22 of the 34 seats reserved for SCs while receiving the lion's share of the support of the other backward classes in that state. Equally worrying for INDIA would be the BJP's storming of the tribal-dominated belts. In Chhattisgarh, it won 17 out of the 29 scheduled tribe seats; the figures for Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan were 24 and 12, respectively. It is a matter of conjecture whether a seat-sharing formula among the Congress's allies would have stemmed this saffron tide among electorally significant social formations. More worryingly, INDIA needs to examine whether one of its principal electoral themes for the general elections, the caste census, which is curated towards disadvantaged social groups, is yielding political dividends. It seems it has formidable adversaries in the BJP's tried-and-tested narrative resting on a combination of majoritarianism, targeted welfare and claims of international triumphalism. Additionally, the disheartening results of this clutch of elections would also put INDIA at a disadvantage in the perception war, a key element of modern elections. Of course, the fractious political ties of the past shared by some of the coalition's partners, a point that the prime minister never ceases to make,

combined with their lethargy to chalk out the battle lines on time and persistent finger-pointing are unlikely to help matters. All in all, the BJP has left not only the Congress but also the Opposition alliance in a spot.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 1-12-2023

30 parties in race for JS; BNP, allies stay away MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

The BNP and its like-minded parties are formally out of the polls as nobody from those submitted nomination papers yesterday, the deadline for the submissions.

Candidates from 30 out of the 44 registered political parties have filed nominations for the national election, Election Commission Secretary Jahangir Alam told The Daily Star last night.

Citing primary statistics, he said 2,741 candidates have submitted nomination papers. However, he could not give the names of the parties.

"The deadline for submission of nomination papers expired at 4:00pm today [yesterday]. It will not be extended," Jahangir said in the evening.

Asked whether the election was destined to be held without the BNP's participation, he said, "You have to understand that." Only 12 political parties contested the 2014 elections amid boycott by the BNP and other opposition parties, resulting in 153 lawmakers getting elected unopposed. In 2018, a total of 39 parties ran, but the BNP and many others rejected the election results citing widespread irregularities.

This time, the BNP, its allies and some left-leaning political parties have been demanding general election under a non-party polls-time For A

the government rejected the demand, prompting the opposition parties to reject the polls schedule announced on November 15. The BNP and several other opposition parties are enforcing a series of blockades and strikes in protest. Meanwhile, the BNP and 39 other political parties in a meeting yesterday discussed drawing up programmes to discourage voters from casting votes.

The parties in a joint statement demanded scrapping of the polls schedule. They also urged the government to take steps to hold the election under a non-party polls-time government.

NUMBER OF CANDIDATES DROPS

For the January 7 election, at least 2,741 aspirants submitted nomination papers, which is lower than that of the previous election, shows EC data.

A total of 3,056 nomination papers were filed in 2018. The figure was 1,107 in 2014, 2,460 in 2008, 2,563 in 2001, 3,093 in 1996 and 3,855 in 1991.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 2-12-2023

Independents all-time high

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR and ASIFUR RAHMAN

The number of independent aspirants submitting nomination papers for the upcoming national polls is at an all time high.

Election Commission data shows that a total of 747 independent aspirants submitted nomination papers till Thursday, the last date of submission.

Experts said more independent candidates are vying for office as the ruling Awami League decided to allow independents to raise voter turnout.

AL sources said at least 442 party leaders have submitted nominations; among them, around 60 incumbent lawmakers were denied party tickets.

RISE OF INDEPENDENTS

Although EC did not publish official data on how many candidates in total filed nomination papers, highly placed sources in the EC told The Daily Star the number was 2,711.

During the 2018 election, a total of 498 independent aspirants filed nominations, and of them, 128 vied as candidates, according to EC.

A total of 39 political parties, including all major political parties, took part in that election.

In 2014, around 150 independent aspirants submitted nominations, and of them, 104 ran in the polls. Only 12 political parties contested amid boycotts by the BNP and other opposition parties, resulting in 153 lawmakers getting elected unopposed.

There were 120 independent candidates in 1973, 422 in 1979, 453 in 1986, 214 in 1988, 424 in 1991, 284 in 1996, 486 in 2001, and 151 in 2008 elections, EC data shows.

AL Joint General Secretary AFM Bahauddin Nasim said, "The party is allowing candidates to vie as independents to make the election more competitive. More candidates mean higher voter turnout; that is also on our minds. But as a disciplined party, Awami League will control the independent candidates if necessary."

Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan) Secretary Badiul Alam Majumdar said the ruling party's decision was key for the record number of independents this time.

"They [AL] have taken up a strategy to allow [its leaders to run as] independent and dummy candidates to raise the number of participants, so that the election is among themselves," he said.

"The position of lawmaker is 'a golden deer' for many. If they become lawmakers, they will be able to get money and fame, as well as supremacy in the area. That is why so many people want to be lawmakers," Badiul said.

Meanwhile, BNP and its allies boycotted the polls as they were demanding the election under a non-party polls-time administration.

But the government rejected the demand, prompting the opposition parties to reject the polls schedule announced on November 15.

PARTY WISE ASPIRANTS

The number of AL aspirants is 303, with two contenders each nominated for five seats; while there are 304 aspirants from Jatiya Party, with two contenders each nominated for 18 seats.

Jatiya Party (JP-Manju) has 20 candidates, Bangladesher Samyabadi Dal has six, Krishak Shramik Janata League has 34, Gonotantri Party has 12, Bangladesh National Awami Party (NAP) has six, Workers Party of Bangladesh has 33, Bikolpodhara Bangladesh has 14, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Inu) has 91, Zaker Party has 218, Bangladesh Tarikat Federation has 47, Bangladesh Kelafat Andolon has 14, Bangladesh Muslim League has two, National People's Party has 142, Gono Forum has nine, Gono Front has 25, Bangladesh Jatiya Party (Mukit) has 13, Islamic Front Bangladesh has 39, Bangladesh Kalyan Party has 18, Islami Oikya Jote has 45, Bangladesh Islami Front has 37, Bangladesh Muslim League (Panja) has five, Bangladesh Sangskritik Muktijote has 74, Bangladesh Nationalist Front has 55, Bangladesh Congress has 116, Trinamool BNP has 151, Bangladesh Nationalist Movement has 49 and Bangladesh Supreme Party has 82.

Political analysts say that these parties are mostly AL allies, and little-known and newly-formed parties.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 15-12-2023

12th General Election

EC validates 257 candidates, scraps 213 candidacies on last day of hearing

Polls symbol distribution Dec 18

Staff Correspondent

In five days hearing Election Commission (EC) validates 257 aspirants candidacy and scrapped candidacy of 213 candidates for the 12th general election.

The commission led by Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibul Awal took the decision on Thursday.

Election Commissions (EC) legal wing said, "On the fifth day (Thursday) of hearing 44 candidates got their candidacy back, 52 applications were rejected, hearing of four applications are pending and one plaintiff was absent during the hearing." Today (Friday) is the last day of the Election Commissions (EC) hearing against the returning officers decisions of scrapping 731 candidates. On Wednesday, 99 peoples appeals were heard and 45 people returned their candidatures. 52 peoples appeals have been rejected. Two more applications have not been decided.

Candidacy of 61 candidates were returned on the third day on Tuesday, 51 on the second day on Monday and

56 on the first day on Sunday. After scrutiny returning officers scrapped 731 candidates against the decision 561 candidates appeals.

On December 18, the election symbol will be allotted. Voting for the 12th National Assembly elections will be held on January 7.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 10-12-2023

A new chapter for the SLPP

Second National Convention on December 15":

By Subhadra Deshapriya

It is indisputable that the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), which added a new dimension to the political landscape of this country, will go down in history as the party that had won the people's favour in a very short period amidst many challenges. With a vision of a moral and ethical political culture, the SLPP was founded on November 2, 2016.

There were many political issues that led to the formation of this party. Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa lost the 2015 Presidential Election and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) fell into the hands of President Maithripala Sirisena. Afterwards, individuals who respected the political agenda of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa were subjected to a certain degree of repression.

The camp loyal to President Rajapaksa raised the need for a suitable avenue for them to do politics. In November 2016, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna was formed under the leadership of Mahinda Rajapaksa. The proposal to create this party was transformed into the 'Mahinda Wind' (Mahinda Sulanga) that went around the country.

Even though the proposal was raised by the public, the important role of organising this force was played by political mastermind Basil Rajapaksa. Plans to build this party were launched during the period when Basil Rajapaksa was imprisoned under various charges. After his release from prison, he shouldered the difficult task of making party a reality. The formalisation of the rural branch network was started by calling a group of 20 from each village with the aim of testing people's power. Strengthening the organisational network at the grassroots level, branch societies were also built across the country.

The political leadership of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) was able to subtly understand that their political objective could be uniting the force built around Mahinda Rajapaksa again.

Crucial political event

May Day 2017 was the most crucial political event in the party's progress. The large crowd that gathered was a great driving force for the party. The people gathered on that day witnessed the genesis of a very strong political movement. Certain professionals who were not

tied to political parties in Sri Lanka also gathered around this party.

Basil Rajapaksa as the founder of the party held a strong opinion at that time. He stressed that they must contest the Local Government (LG) Election as a single party. Other political parties willing to join hands with the SLPP were also invited. The strength of the party was displayed by achieving a great victory at the LG polls.

The strongest people's force in this country was around the SLPP, which easily won the Presidential Election and the General Election held subsequently. This political power camp won because of its prudent political decisions. The political leadership of Mahinda Rajapaksa and Basil Rajapaksa as well as other leading members of the party gave impetus for these victories. In the past five years, this party, which was born in the midst of many challenges, has faced many different challenges and overcome them. It is unique that the SLPP was able to move forward without ever being swayed by the accusations made by political opponents.

After the 2018 LG Election, the SLPP Presidential Election campaign was completely based on the Nelum Mawatha party structure. In Sri Lanka's recent history, it is a special fact that the SLPP planned a Presidential Election based on the party structure. Constituencies, district meetings, national conferences etc. were all built through the party structure.

In the General Election, an opportunity was given to many people who were outside the party structure. Even though some of these groups and personalities have left the SLPP today, the party has been able to maintain a Parliamentary majority, as evidenced by recent voting patterns on many issues in Parliament.

Economic crisis

With the unexpected arrival of Covid-19, an economic crisis arose in this country. Sri Lanka had made good progress since Independence, at least until 1970. There was a youth rebellion in this country in 1971. This was followed by the July 1980 strike. Black July riots took place in 1983. Again there was a season of terror in 1988/89.

There was a terrorist uprising for 30 years until 2009, when it was crushed under the able leadership of then President Mahinda Rajapaksa. In 2004, the country faced the Boxing Day Tsunami. Sri Lanka overcame all these. Among all these phenomena, the economy in this country could not withstand any external shocks. No specific individual or single Government could be held responsible for this state of affairs. This is a problem with a long history of 50 or 60 years since Independence 75 years ago.

It was influenced by other economic systems and factors. Not focusing on export development and industrialisation are factors that affected the economy adversely. After the SLPP government came to power, it was possible to move forward for some time. Then the Covid pandemic struck, affecting every segment of the

economy. Imports, except for the most essential goods, were halted and there were many expenditure cuts.

All the tasks spearheaded by the SLPP including the organic fertiliser policy were done for the betterment of the people. Development programs and job creation went ahead. Within three months of starting this program, i.e. in March 2020, the country had to be completely shut down due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Remittances of foreign workers stopped, the tourism industry collapsed, Rs 5,000 was given to low-income earners and other select groups, all necessities during quarantine were met, salaries of public servants were maintained and public facilities were maintained. Although the country's economy suffered a severe collapse due to having to import vaccines worth billions of dollars to save the people from the deadly pandemic, some political opponents blamed the Rajapaksas for the whole situation. In order to fulfil their insular political interests, bankrupt politicians used to spread falsehoods vilifying the Rajapaksas and the SLPP.

An important point to remember is that when former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's rule ended and the country was handed over to the Good Governance Government, there were US\$ 8.2 billion in foreign reserves. The Good Governance Government had reduced it to US\$ 7.1 by the time President Gotabaya Rajapaksa came to power in November 2019.

However, a shortage of dollars occurred after all avenues of dollar inflows were closed due to Covid from March 2020. At that time, the country faced an economic crisis. There were no funds to import oil used for transport and electricity generation. The latter led to prolonged power cuts. There were long queues for many imported essentials.

The SLPP's opponents who were analysing this as a good opportunity to topple the nascent Government took advantage of this politically and a battle was launched to force the Members of the Government to resign. In a country where people have been killed for the sake of power, in a country that rebelled for the sake of power, the SLPP did not follow that suffocating political culture. Former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa did not follow that immoral method for hanging on to power because he respected a moral and ethical political culture. He left the post very democratically. The Government was also removed by July last year. After that, the SLPP as a party faced a shock and a setback.

Revival

But in a very short time it has started to rise again from the ashes, Phoenix-like. Thousands of people have participated in grassroots meetings to re-strengthen the constituencies and such meetings were organised all over the country. The network of branch societies was strengthened. The National General Convention will be convened on the 15th as the final program in this revival movement. Next year is an election year. It is expected that the anticipated future performance of the party in

that election year will be disclosed before the Nation at the General National Convention.

Attorney-at-Law and MP Sagara Kariyawasam, General Secretary of the SLPP, says that anyone who contested from SLPP at the previous elections and is now with other political groups, but is disillusioned with those alternative groups and their sinister agendas, is welcome to rejoin the SLPP at the forthcoming Convention. He has expressed confidence that the SLPP will go from strength to strength over the coming months and once again become the most formidable political force in the country.

(Prepared from a discussion with SLPP MP Sanjiva Edirimanna and translated by Jonathan Frank)

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 10-12-2023

Parties gear up for National Assembly election

Some leaders withdraw their names from the closed list of PR candidates as they plan to contest upper house seats.

Post Report

Political parties are gearing up for the National Assembly elections scheduled for January 25.

The terms of 20 lawmakers in the 59-strong upper house expire on March 3. While 19 positions will be filled through elections, one member will be nominated by the President on the Cabinet's recommendation.

The ruling Nepali Congress is ahead in the preparations. It has recommended that the Election Commission withdraw five names of its leaders from the closed list under the proportional representation category submitted ahead of the November polls last year. The names of Gopal Man Shrestha, Anand Prasad Dhungana, Shukra Raj Sharma and Abdul Satar, among others, have been withdrawn from the closed list after they showed their interest in contesting the Assembly elections.

The candidates listed for the proportional representation category for the House of Representatives elections cannot contest the upper house polls.

"It is possible that a few other names too will be taken off the closed list," Krishna Prasad Poudel, chief secretary of the Congress, told the Post. "All of them are aspirants for the upper house. The party will decide the candidates."

The names on the closed list must be removed before nominations are filed. "Various parties have sought to withdraw the names of their candidates from closed lists. The commission will decide on the matter soon," Surya Aryal, assistant spokesperson for the commission, told the Post.

Another ruling party, the CPN (Unified Socialist), has called a Secretariat meeting for December 14 and 15 to select its candidates. The commission has called the

political parties willing to participate in the election to register between December 10 and December 15.

The election symbols will be provided to the parties on January 1. The election officers will be appointed on January 16 and the office of the election officer will be established in each of the seven provincial election offices the same day, according to the commission.

The terms of the incumbent National Assembly members were determined through lots—for two years, four years and six years. The tenure of the first lot of 19 lawmakers ended on March 4, 2020 while the second lot retired on March 4 last year. The previous elections were held on January 26, 2022. The upcoming elections are for the vacancies created by the retirement of members having served six years.

The National Assembly has 59 members. Of them, 56 are elected, and three are nominated by the President on the recommendation of the Council of Ministers. Each of the seven provinces elects eight members including women and representatives from marginalised communities and those with disabilities.

As many as 549 provincial assembly members and 1,504 chiefs and their deputies of the local units are eligible for voting. However, one position each of a provincial assembly member, chairperson and vice-chairperson of rural municipalities are lying vacant.

The parties in the ruling alliance are likely to contest the Assembly elections jointly. This would mean the main opposition would suffer a huge loss in the vote. Seven of the 19 lawmakers whose terms end in March are from the CPN-UML. As per a preliminary assessment, the Congress would win nine seats and the CPN (Maoist Centre) six while the Unified Socialist and the Janata Samajbadi parties will land one seat each.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 4-12-2023

UML too hits the campaign trail with an eye on 2027 vote

As ruling parties are relatively quiet, opposition forces are trying to make themselves seen and boost their prospects.

BINOD GHIMIRE

KATHMANDU, The constitution mandates the holding of general elections every five years. Snap polls come only when all constitutional options of government formation fail.

The Pushpa Kamal Dahal government, elected after the parliamentary vote held last year, is about to complete a year in office. That leaves four years for the next federal and provincial elections. But Nepali political parties already seem to be itching to head to the polls.

Neither the first party in the federal parliament, Nepali Congress, nor the second, CPN-UML, leads the government. It's rather the third, Dahal's CPN (Maoist Centre), which steers the administration from Singha Durbar.

Last year's polls elected a hung parliament. The pre-poll alliance of the Congress, the Maoists and some fringe forces, and Dahal's manoeuvrings after the results were out, propelled the leader who once waged a decade-long insurgency to the seat of power.

Dahal so far enjoys the backing of the Congress, the Janata Samajbadi Party, the CPN (Unified Socialist), the Janamat Party and the Nagarik Unmukti Party. As the Maoist Centre,

the Congress and the Unified Socialist remain committed to the tripartite deal to lead the government on a rotation basis, there is no immediate sign of snap polls.

Rabi Lamichhane's promising outfit, Rastriya Swatantra Party, still licking its wounds after being ejected from Singha Durbar following a brief stint in government, aims to win a bigger share of parliamentary seats in 2027, in what it dubs 'Mission Chaurasi'.

Every other party, new and old ones alike, is now aiming for that opportunity. This is why they are already campaigning to consolidate their vote-share in the next elections.

The Swatantra Party held a three-day joint meeting of its central committee and the parliamentary party in Jaleshwar of Mahottari. Choosing Jaleshwar was a strategic decision for the party, in order to convey the message that Madhesh is its priority now. Just two weeks ago, the party went door to door thanking voters.

The day the fourth-largest party concluded its Madhesh meet, the UML started its own hill-centric campaign. Party chair and former prime minister KP Sharma Oli inaugurated the 19-day "Jhulaghat-Chiwa Bhanjyang March for Prosperity" in Baitadi.

The Oli-led march aims at interacting with the local communities in 26 districts connected by Mid-Hill Highway, also called Pushpa Lal Highway, named after the Nepal Communist Party's founder.

"This campaign is definitely a part of Mission 27 [the general elections will be held in 2027]. However, that is not the only goal," Bishnu Rimal, the party's deputy general secretary, told the Post.

"We want to listen to the people, get in touch with them."

While announcing the march on November 8, the party announced that it was more than a political campaign, and targeted at giving a message of development and national unity.

"These days development activities are gradually being concentrated in the hills and rural areas. But then more and more people are migrating to the Tarai and urban areas," Pradeep Gyawali, the party's deputy general secretary, said. "We need to stop this [migration] trend, or development activities up in the hills will be meaningless."

It was the UML government that started building the Mid-Hill Highway. This year marks the diamond jubilee

of the communist party established by Pushpa Lal Shrestha.

Addressing the inaugural event in Jhulaghat, Baitadi on Thursday, Oli said his is the only party the general public can rely on. This journey across the hills will be an opportunity to interact with the general people at the grassroots and conduct an on-site study of local issues, Oli said. "The knowledge gathered from such events will help in policy-making."

Dozens of party leaders and cadres are on the march. Oli will be leading the campaign covering 1,771 kilometres. Rajendra Gautam, chief of the party's publicity department, said they are interacting with all communities along the way.

"This is not a mass demonstration. We are not focusing on gathering people. Yet thousands of people turn up wherever we go," Gautam told the Post. "We are excited and encouraged by such an enthusiastic public response."

From Baitadi, the march stopped at Dadeldhura before reaching Mangalsen in Achham district. Oli addressed the gatherings in all the places.

Gautam said the party interacted with people at Rakam in Dailekh district on Sunday. "Today's [Sunday] gathering in Rakam was one of the largest the place had ever seen," Gautam claimed. The party leadership will address a gathering in Surkhet on Monday before moving to Jajarkot. The march will conclude in Chiwa Bhanjyang of Panchthar district on December 18.

"The event has re-energised both the party and the people," said Rimal.

The opposition party had organised a grassroots campaign before the bypolls in April. However, the drive seemed to have little effect in the face of an alliance of the ruling parties. The UML fared poorly in the by-elections.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 11-12-2023

Iran's parliament approves cooperation bill with Russia

TEHRAN – The parliament in Iran has approved the details of a bill outlining cooperation in the field of information security between Iran and Russia.

In an open session on Sunday, the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee's report on the bill was presented, with its generalities gaining approval, garnering 180 votes in favor and 27 against.

The bill encompasses an introduction, 9 articles, and an appendix, granting permission for the exchange of documents between the governments of Iran and Russia in the realm of information security.

During deliberations, Abolfazl Amouei, spokesman for the Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, highlighted the emerging cyber threats globally and emphasized that the bill and

cooperation with Russia offer solutions to counteract these threats.

Representing Tehran in the parliament, he underscored the multifaceted nature of Iran-Russia relations, urging their enhancement. Previous agreements have spanned cultural, transit, goods, and other sectors, with a call for diversification into information security cooperation.

Addressing concerns about potential changes to the bill, another MP emphasized that information security covers economic, social, and general security aspects, predicting that the bill would contribute to economic, political, social, and informational development.

The bill also faced scrutiny regarding its specification of cooperation types and potential conflicts with existing laws. Responding to concerns, Abdolreza Mesri, Spokesman for the Iranian Parliament's presiding board, clarified that the agreement prohibits either party from disclosing information without the other's permission.

The government representative defended the bill, citing the Leader of the Islamic Revolution's announced policies on defense self-sufficiency and security.

Negotiations on the agreement commenced in 2018, considering various aspects of the country's information and security.

Stressing compliance with Iranian laws and economic and social interests, the representative highlighted the potential for deepening practical and security relations between Iran and Russia in the field of cyber information.

As the bill clears this parliamentary hurdle, observers anticipate it will strengthen the strategic direction of Iran-Russia relations in the realm of information security. The final implementation awaits the voting of parliamentarians in subsequent stages.

MAS

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 15-12-2023

No plan to delay polls even after LHC intervention: ECP

Monitoring Desk

ISLAMABAD/LAHORE - The Lahore High Court (LHC) has suspended the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) notification appointing district returning officers (DROs), returning officers (ROs), and assistant returning officers (AROs) from the executive for rendering duties during the general elections scheduled to be held on February 8.

Presiding over the hearing a day earlier, LHC's Justice Ali Baqar Najafi sent the matter to the LHC's Chief Justice Muhammad Ameer Bhatti for the constitution of a larger bench.

Justice Najafi was of the view that the importance of the legal interpretation of the constitutional provisions having a legal effect is deeply connected to the currently raised national issue.

“Undoubtedly, the holding of general elections costs this poor nation billions which may be wasted if the election results are not accepted by major political parties. The intention of the Election Commission to conduct a free, fair, impartial election is yet to be transformed into reality by providing equal opportunities to the candidates for electioneering and voters to vote with their choice without fear of anyone,” the judge observed yesterday.

“In the present scenario general elections may not give the desired results which may undermine the future of democracy in our country,” the court stated further.

In his judgment, Justice Najafi, said, “On the factual ground, the apparent absence of a level playing field for the political party of the petitioner is visible to all and has also been seriously noted by many independent groups. With the top political leadership in jail or gone into hiding, the electioneering by his political party would be a big question mark,” Justice Najafi observed.

The petition was filed by Barrister Umair Khan Niazi, PTI’s additional secretary general and focal person on legal affairs to former chairman Imran Khan and the PTI, challenging appointments of DROs, ROs and AROs with the claim that the general elections could not be conducted transparently, fairly or freely in the presence of these officers from the branch of the state.

However, the law officer strongly opposed the contentions of the petitioner’s counsel and requested the court to dismiss the petition. ECP’s counsel also requested the court to dismiss this plea as non-maintainable.

Following the court order, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) suspended the ongoing training of District Returning Officers (DROs) and Returning Officers (ROs). An ECP spokesman stated that the LHC has suspended the ECP’s notification dated December 11, 2023, related to the appointment of 142 District Returning Officers (DROs), 859 Assistant Returning Officers (AROs), and Returning Officers from the executive for the upcoming general elections 2024. The comprehensive training for District Returning Officers (DROs) and Returning Officers (ROs) began on Wednesday last. Senior officers from the Election Commission conducted training sessions, focusing on election procedures, rules, and other administrative aspects.

The commission has scheduled a one-day training session for 142 District Returning Officers in all four provincial headquarters on December 16. This includes

40 officers from Punjab, 36 from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 36 from Balochistan, and 30 from Sindh.

Likewise, 859 Returning Officers (ROs) are undergoing a two-day election training at their respective divisional levels from December 13 to 15. This comprises 441 ROs from Punjab, 160 from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 191 from Sindh, and 67 from Balochistan. However, the ECP rejected the allegations of any planning to delay the upcoming polls, claiming that it has completed all necessary arrangements to conduct the polls. In reaction to the PTI blames about delaying the polls, the Commission rejected these claims. “These are unfounded and baseless claims which are aimed at misguiding the people,” said the election regulatory body in a statement issued here.

The ECP clarified that the polls will take place on February 8 and that all preparations have been made.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 4-12-2023

Elections in Pakistan: EU not sending full election observation mission

During 2018 elections, EU deployed EU EOM comprising core team of ten analysts, 60 long-term observers

By Mariana Baabar

ISLAMABAD: The European Union (EU) has informed the government here that due to paucity of time, it will not be sending a full election observation mission as it did in 2018. Also, no recommendations will be presented at the conclusion of February 8, 2024 elections.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has stated that it welcomes observation missions for elections 2024. The EU Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) has monitored elections in Pakistan five times.

During the June 2018 elections, the EU deployed the EU EOM comprising a core team of ten analysts and 60 long-term observers across the country. On the election day, it deployed a total of 122 observers. Later, in October 2018, the final report was presented to the Pakistan authorities, which included 30 recommendations to improve future electoral processes, of which eight are considered priorities.

“Only a small mission of experts will visit Pakistan during elections 2024, while no recommendations or political assessment of the voting will be presented to

the Pakistan government. The EU will not be sending a full-blown election observation mission. Those need several months in advance to plan and budget for,” EU Ambassador to Pakistan Ms Riina Kionka told The News. She added that this has been conveyed to different government officials that she had been meeting recently.

When the spokeswoman at the Foreign Office was asked whether the ECP with the consultation or advice of the Foreign Office had issued any invitations to election observers from individual countries or international organizations, she responded, “I do not have that data with me. So, I’ll have to take it back and may be respond at some other occasion.”

The ECP has urged the Foreign Office to take essential measures to invite international observers to monitor transparency of the upcoming general elections, and code of conduct for international observers would also be published.

The ECP says it has informed the Foreign Office that it believes in an open-door policy and welcomes observation missions for the upcoming general elections at the earliest as required.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 9-12-2023

Top CPC meeting charts China’s policymaking for 2024; sends strong signal of strengthening economic vitality and confidence

By Ma Jingjing, Li Xuanmin and Yin Yeping

A meeting attended by China's top leaders on Friday called for strengthening economic vitality, containing risks and improving social expectations so as to cement and strengthen the positive momentum of economic upturn, as part of the economic assessment and policymaking for 2024.

The key gathering, which is assumed to come ahead of the annual Central Economic Work Conference (CEWC), puts the focus on a stable economic rebound and is set to boost market confidence, economists said. They expressed confidence in achieving the pre-set annual GDP growth target of around 5 percent this year, while expecting the country to continue being a leading engine of global growth next year.

The Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee on Friday held a meeting to analyze and study the economic work of 2024, arrange

Party conduct and anti-corruption work, and review regulations on the CPC's disciplinary action, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

The country should strengthen counter-cyclical and cross-cyclical adjustments of macro policies and continue to implement a proactive fiscal policy and a prudent monetary policy. The proactive fiscal policy should be appropriately intensified and improved in quality and efficiency, while the prudent monetary policy should be flexible, appropriate, targeted and effective, according to the meeting, calling for more consistency in macro-policies.

The meeting stresses stable macro-economic policies, which underscores top officials' positive attitude on the fundamentals of the economy and gives reassurance to all industries, Cao Heping, an economist at Peking University, told the Global Times on Friday.

That it specifically pointed out the direction of efforts in implementing the fiscal and monetary policies is in line with the expectations of enterprises, Cao said, noting that he expected more positive market responses following the meeting, such as increased investment from the private sector.

Li Xunlei, chief economist at Zhongtai Securities, told the Global Times on Friday that further interest rate and reserve requirement ratio cuts are possible in 2024.

Efforts should be made to expand domestic demand and form a virtuous cycle in which consumption and investment promote each other. We need to deepen reforms in key areas and continuously inject strong impetus into high-quality development, the meeting said, noting that a modern industrial system will be built led by sci-tech innovations so as to increase the resilience and security of supply chains.

The meeting stressed the country's commitment to high-level opening-up, and vowed to strengthen the fundamentals of foreign trade and foreign investment. Meanwhile, the country will continue to effectively prevent and defuse risks in key sectors and resolutely safeguard the bottom line against systemic risks.

On Wednesday, the Central Committee of the CPC held a symposium with non-CPC personages to solicit opinions and suggestions on this year's economic situation and economic work for the next year, according to Xinhua on Friday.

	ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS			
	Subject	Newspapers/Periodicals	Date	Page
	INDIA Economy/Planning/Reforms			
1.	Double-digit gains in four sectors power Q2 GDP growth to 7.6% By Sandeep Dikshit	The Tribune, Chandigarh	1-12-2023	37
2.	Annual GDP growth rate is 5.4%, but government highlighting quarterly growth: Congress - Tribune News Service	The Tribune, Chandigarh	11-12-2023	37
3.	Higher food prices push inflation to 3-month high of 5.5% in November By Sandeep Dikshit	The Tribune, Chandigarh	13-12-2023	37
4.	Multidimensional Poverty Index reduction under the NDA is flawed By Radhika Aggarwal, Vani S. Kulkarni & Raghav Gaiha International Trade and Cooperation	The Hindu, Delhi	7-12-2023	38
5.	PM Rishi Sunak's officials in Delhi to discuss India-UK FTA: Report - PTI	The Tribune, Chandigarh	10-12-2023	39
6.	India will 'retaliate' against unfair EU carbon tax, says Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal By Ravi Dutta Mishra	The Indian Express, New Delhi	9-12-2023	40
7.	India, Kenya ink 5 pacts; New Delhi announces USD 250 mn line of credit for Kenyan agri sector - PTI BANGLADESH Economy/Planning/Reforms	The Telegraph, Kolkata	6-12-2023	40
8.	Govt likely to retreat from its quest for higher growth By Rejaul Karim Byron & Refayet Ullah Mirdha	The Daily Star, Dhaka	6-12-2023	41
9.	Villagers grow food for all. But they end up paying more for it By Md Asaduz Zaman and Md Abu Talha Sarker	The Daily Star, Dhaka	15-12-2023	42
10.	Foreign investment in stock markets halves By Ahsan Habib	The Daily Star, Dhaka	4-12-2023	43
11.	Policy reforms needed to raise private investment: experts - Star Business Report	The Daily Star, Dhaka	13-12-2023	44

	SRI LANKA			
12.	Budget 2024 passed with 41 majority By Irangika Range	Daily News, Colombo	14-12-2023	45
13.	An imperative pathway to economic revival By Hermantha Kulantunga	Sunday Observer, Colombo	10-12-2023	45
14.	PM, EU Envoy discuss cooperation in exports, wellness tourism and higher education NEPAL	Daily News, Colombo	4-12-2023	46
15.	Empowering entrepreneurs Editorial	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	3-12-2023	47
16.	Nepal's forex reserves rise to a record \$12.75 billion - Post Report	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	15-12-2023	48
17.	Cabinet nod for Indian plan to increase aid for small projects in Nepal - Anil Giri IRAN International Trade and Cooperation	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	8-12-2023	49
18.	India to expand activities in Iran's free zones - EF/MA	Tehran Times, Tehran	13-12-2023	50
19.	TPO holds conference on Iran-Saudi Arabia trade opportunities - EF/MA	Tehran Times, Tehran	4-12-2023	51
20.	Iran, Syria ink 6 economic, trade co-op MOUs - MA PAKISTAN	Tehran Times, Tehran	10-12-2023	51
21.	Interest payments remain a challenge as govt paints rosy economic picture By Khaleeq Kiani	Dawn, Islamabad	4-12-2023	52
22.	Pakistan, KSA reach consensus for free trade deal with GCC - Monitoring Desk CHINA	The Nation, Islamabad	4-12-2023	53
23.	Commentary: Upturn in Chinese economy boosts world's confidence - Xinhua	People's Daily, China	2-12-2023	53

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 1-12-2023**Double-digit gains in four sectors power Q2 GDP growth to 7.6%****Sandeep Dikshit**

New Delhi, The Indian economy beat expectations to grow 7.6 per cent during the July-September quarter of the current 2023-24 financial year, thus retaining its tag as the world's fastest growing major economy. The GDP growth in the first quarter of the current fiscal — April-June — was 7.8 per cent.

In quantitative terms, at the end of the second quarter, the economy stood at Rs 41.74 lakh crore. This was about Rs 3 lakh crore higher than in the second quarter in the last fiscal when the growth was 6.2 per cent, according to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

The RBI had maintained real GDP growth for 2023-24 at 6.5 per cent with Q2 at 6.5 per cent; Q3 at 6.0 per cent; and Q4 at 5.7 per cent. Of the eight subgroups used to calculate the country's GDP, agriculture grew by only 1.2 per cent as against 3.5 per cent growth recorded in the first quarter.

The biggest growth was recorded by the manufacturing sector, which grew by a whopping 13 per cent to Rs 7.15 lakh crore as against 6.67 lakh crore in the first quarter. In other words, the manufacturing sector grew by Rs 48,000 crore in just three months. Mining and quarrying sector also posted a healthy growth rate of 10 per cent. But this was also because of the low base as compared with the second quarter of the previous fiscal when there was a decline of 0.1 per cent. The electricity and construction sectors also recorded double digit growth figures.

PM Narendra Modi said the GDP growth numbers indicated economy's resilience.

Key catalysts

The biggest growth was recorded by the manufacturing sector, which grew 13% to Rs 7.15 lakh crore

The mining and quarrying sector also posted a healthy growth rate of 10%

Electricity and construction sectors recorded double-digit growth figures. While the former grew by 10%, construction saw growth of 13.3%

Fiscal deficit touches 45% of full-year target

The government's fiscal deficit at the end of October touched 45 per cent of the full-year budget estimate, according to data released by the Controller General of Accounts on Thursday. In actual terms, the fiscal deficit was Rs 8.03 lakh crore during the April-October period of 2023-24. For 2023-24, the fiscal deficit of the government is estimated to be Rs 17.86 lakh crore or 5.9% of the GDP. **PTI**

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 11-12-2023**Annual GDP growth rate is 5.4%, but government highlighting quarterly growth: Congress**

Jairam Ramesh says the annual GDP growth rate was higher during UPA

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, Slamming the Central Government, the Congress on Sunday said the annual average GDP growth rate during the UPA era was higher than the current regime headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Taking to X, Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh said the PM and FM were claiming "transformative GDP growth in India" based on the recent numbers for July-September 2023.

Quarterly growth numbers could be high or low for a number of reasons, Ramesh said.

What matters a lot more—to understand how well the economy is doing—is annual growth rates over a longer period of time, Ramesh added.

Annual average GDP growth rate when Manmohan Singh was Prime Minister: 8.1 per cent, Ramesh said.

On the other hand, average GDP growth rate so far under Narendra Modi as Prime Minister was 5.4 per cent, Ramesh pointed out.

"Which is truly transformative?", the Congress leader asked.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 13-12-2023**Higher food prices push inflation to 3-month high of 5.5% in November****Sandeep Dikshit**

New Delhi, Retail inflation inched up to a three-month high of 5.55 per cent in November due to higher food prices. Retail inflation was 5.88 per cent in November last year. It thus reversed the gains of October when Consumer Price Index (CPI) based inflation dropped to a five-month low of 4.87 per cent in October.

As has been the trend for some time, rural inflation at 5.85 per cent was higher than urban inflation at 5.26 per cent, according to an official data released on Tuesday. In October, rural inflation was 5.12 per cent and urban inflation 4.62 per cent.

The rate of price rise in the food basket was 8.7 per cent against 6.61 per cent in October and 4.67 per cent in November 2022, according to the National Statistical Office data. The rise in food prices caused more pain in urban areas where the Consumer Food Price Index (CFPI) was 9.28 per cent while it was 8.38 per cent in rural areas.

High prices of meat and fish, fruits and vegetables and snacks and sweets were particularly high in urban areas. In rural areas, the rate of inflation was much higher than urban areas in clothing and footwear, fuel, health, education, transport and communication.

The inflation rate is higher than the RBI's upper comfort ceiling of four per cent but is broadly consistent with the RBI's projection of 5.4 per cent for the entire 2023-24.

Industrial growth surges to 11.7%

India's industrial production growth accelerated to 16-month high of 11.7% in October, due to double-digit growth in the output of manufacturing, power and mining sectors

The factory output growth measured in terms of the Index of Industrial Production had contracted by 4.1% in October 2022. The previous high of IIP growth was recorded at 12.6% in June 2022

THE HINDU, DELHI 7-12-2023

Multidimensional Poverty Index reduction under the NDA is flawed

The Multidimensional Poverty Index exaggerates the National Democratic Alliance's success in fighting deprivation

Radhika Aggarwal, Vani S. Kulkarni, Raghav Gaiha
Samuel Johnson, a profound literary critic and essayist, wrote, "Poverty is a great enemy to human happiness; it certainly destroys liberty, and it makes some virtues impracticable, and others extremely difficult." In sharp contrast, conventional measures of poverty in terms of income are limited and narrowly focused on scarcity of resources to eke out a bare subsistence. But there is much more to poverty than a bare subsistence, as emphasised by Johnson and others.

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen pioneered a rich, innovative and broader perspective on well-being, focusing on capabilities and functionings. While capabilities are abilities to do this or that in a free and fair environment, functionings reflect achievements. An ability to live a healthy life, for example, is not necessarily related to affluence as it could result in obesity and vulnerability to non-communicable diseases. Achievements such as being healthy, on the other hand, require a nourishing diet and physical exercise. Professor Sen has, however, resisted aggregation of concepts such as capabilities into an overall measure of well-being as he believes that each capability is important in itself.

The MPI story

Unfortunately, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) seized upon capabilities to construct an overall measure of human development with uniform weights of the three components: health, education and standard of living and their sub-indices. Following this methodology, NITI Aayog and the UNDP released recently a National Multidimensional Poverty Index/MPI: A Progress Review 2023, also replicated in the UNDP Report, Making Our Future: New Directions for Human Development in Asia and the Pacific, released on November 7, 2023. Hence, these reports suffer from the same flaws as the UNDP human development index: aggregation with uniform

weighting. But, the MPI story is further distorted, as elaborated on below.

Astonishingly, the MPI 2023 estimates show a near-halving of India's national MPI value and a decline from 24.85% to 14.96% between 2015-16 and 2019-21. This reduction of 9.89 percentage points implies that about 135.5 million people have exited poverty between 2015-16 and 2019-21. Besides, the intensity of poverty, which measures the average deprivation among the people living in multidimensional poverty, reduced from 47.14% to 44.39%.

But these estimates — especially the rapid reductions in MPI — cannot be taken at face value for various reasons. Indeed, these are misleading and ill-informed. First, the MPI relies upon National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 4 and 5, which are not detailed enough for its estimation. Moreover, NFHS 5 is blocked as its estimate of open defecation contradicted exaggerated official claim of its complete elimination. In fact, an eminent demographer, who led NFHS 5 was suspended. Intriguingly, while the survey was blocked for its alleged unreliability, NITI Aayog and the UNDP had no qualms about using it. Ideally, NFHS 4 and 5 should have been combined with the 75th Round of the NSS on household consumption expenditure. Unfortunately, this was abandoned too, as leaked poverty estimates indicated a rise.

What casts further doubts is the havoc caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21. Millions lost their livelihoods, thousands died in reverse migration and from a lack of access to vaccines and medical care. In fact, as a consequence of this epidemic, there was a huge economic shock from which the Indian economy has been struggling to recover. To illustrate, GDP growth has declined from 8% in 2015-16 to 3.78 % in 2019-20 and slumped -6.60 in 2020-21, as also per capita income. Not just bare subsistence turned into a daunting challenge for millions but, equally seriously, public funding for maintenance and expansion of health and education and social safety nets suffered an irreparable blow.

Focus on covariates

Our recent analysis focuses on covariates of the MPI that include per capita state income, its square, share of criminals among State MPs, share of urban population, and health and education expenditure and unobserved state fixed effects (e.g., how progressive a State is). If we compare elasticities of MPI with respect to each covariate (i.e., proportionate change in MPI due to a proportionate change in a covariate such as State per capita income), the largest reduction in MPI is due to higher State per capita income. But since income decreased drastically, MPI spiked. The next in order of importance is urban location. A 1% increase in urban location results in a 0.90% increase in MPI. This is not surprising as rural-urban migration is associated with growth of slums and sub-human living conditions.

However, reverse migration during COVID-19 may explain why the effect on MPI is less than proportionate. Both health care and education expenditure are associated with lower MPI — the elasticity of the latter is higher (in absolute value), implying that a 1% increase in the latter reduces MPI more than the same increase in the former. As State-level estimates suggest a decline in educational expenditure, a rise in MPI is likely. Although State-level health expenditure rose to combat COVID-19, it fell far short of what was needed. If the share of Members of Parliament with criminal cases in total State MPs exceeded 20%, the higher was the MPI. This is not surprising as criminal Members of the Legislative Assembly and MPs are notoriously corrupt and siphon-off funds allocated for social safety nets and area development programmes. Indeed, what is alarming is their rising share — 24% of the winners in the Lok Sabha election in 2004 had a criminal background; it rose to 30% in the 2009 general election, 34% in the 2014 election, and 43% in the 2019 election. If we go by our estimates of MPI, the reduction between 2015 and 2019-21 is considerably lower than the official estimate: 4.7 percentage points compared with 9.89 percentage points. Our selective review of MPI estimates shows that poverty rose in India's most populous State, Uttar Pradesh, by over seven percentage points. Of the States that went to the elections in November (Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Rajasthan and Telangana), we find that the MPI fell in Chhattisgarh (by over six percentage points), in Rajasthan (by two percentage points) and, most strikingly, in Madhya Pradesh (by about eight percentage points).

In conclusion, not only does the MPI exaggerate the NDA's success in fighting deprivation but also perhaps more seriously obfuscates conventional measures of it which may unravel a contradictory story of poverty.

Radhika Aggarwal is a doctoral student at Faculty of Management Studies, University of Delhi. Vani S. Kulkarni is Research Affiliate at the Population Studies Centre, University of Pennsylvania, U.S. Raghav Gaiha is Research Affiliate at the Population Studies Centre, University of Pennsylvania, U.S. The views are personal

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 10-12-2023

PM Rishi Sunak's officials in Delhi to discuss India-UK FTA: Report

"The deal is still very much on and we think it is possible before both countries have their elections"

PTI

London, Senior officials from British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's team are in New Delhi this week to add momentum behind the ongoing round of negotiations for an India-UK free trade agreement (FTA), according to a UK media report on Saturday.

'The Guardian' newspaper reports that while there is no official comment from either side on such a visit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government is keen to finalise the FTA by the end of February before Sunak sets off on an expected general election campaign trail. Both countries are heading into an election year in 2024 and signing off on a trade agreement with India will bolster Sunak's electoral pitch to voters showing signs of anti-incumbency towards his governing Conservatives.

"The deal is still very much on and we think it is possible before both countries have their elections. Both sides are keen to get this done," an official close to the talks told the newspaper.

The India-UK FTA talks began in January last year with Diwali 2022 set as the initial deadline by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

There have been 13 rounds of negotiations since then, with the Sunak-led Tory government wary of setting any firm new timelines to clinch a deal that is expected to significantly enhance the GBP 36-billion bilateral trading partnership.

"The UK and India continue to work towards an ambitious trade deal that works for both countries. We have always been clear we will only sign a deal that is fair, balanced, and ultimately in the best interests of the British people and the economy," said a spokesperson for the Department for Business and Trade (DBT), reiterating the official UK government line.

Most recently, External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar confirmed that the FTA was among the many topics on the agenda during his visit to the UK last month and expressed confidence that both sides would find a "landing point that works for both of us".

"We have made substantial progress... I think both sides are very aware of the importance of the FTA and will make the utmost effort to get there. So, we have to take it as it happens," Jaishankar told reporters after he met with Sunak and other senior Cabinet ministers.

The minister also discussed the FTA negotiations with UK Opposition leaders in meetings with Labour leader Keir Starmer and shadow foreign secretary David Lammy during his November visit.

There had been some speculation that cricket enthusiast Sunak would be following up his first India visit as UK prime minister for the G20 Summit in September with some cricket diplomacy at the England versus India World Cup clash in Lucknow on October 29 when the highly anticipated FTA could be signed off.

However, the internal political turmoil of a Cabinet reshuffle within the Tory party and the Israel-Hamas conflict on the global front were said to have side-tracked focus.

"We are very close...We will finish when we finish," UK Business and Trade Secretary Kemi Badenoch told a House of Commons committee when questioned about timelines recently.

Meanwhile, her Indian counterpart, Union Minister for Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal has indicated that nearly 20 of the 26 chapters have been closed.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 9-12-2023

India will 'retaliate' against unfair EU carbon tax, says Commerce Minister

Piyush Goyal

Ravi Dutta Mishra

Amid brewing tensions between the European Union (EU) and supplier countries at the World Trade Organization (WTO) over the Brussels' Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal said Friday that India will "retaliate" against such unfair taxes.

This comes as New Delhi is working on its own carbon tax mechanism which aims to penalise imports from developed countries for the historic carbon emission that has played a much larger role in fuelling global warming. "Bharat will address the problem of CBAM with confidence. We will find solutions. We will see how we can convert CBAM to our advantage. Of course we will retaliate. India today does not do these things easily. Even with the US, we retaliated when they had put unfair taxes on us. And see what happened. We were able to resolve all the seven WTO disputes," Goyal said while speaking at an industry event. Policymakers have said that the EU's carbon tax, that aims to impose tariffs on emissions embedded in goods produced outside Europe, is estimated to hit Indian metal exports worth over \$8 billion annually, starting in 2026.

A transitional period for CBAM began on October 1, 2023 and is set to end on December 31, 2025, during which time quarterly emissions reporting will be required. Actual taxes will be imposed from 2026 onwards. The impact is only expected to rise as the EU plans to widen the list of items to impose taxes on going forward. Currently, the items include iron & steel, aluminium, cement, fertilizers, electricity and hydrogen. "The CBAM tax, between 20 per cent and 35 per cent, is far higher than the EU's average import tariff of 2.2 per cent on manufactured products. High CBAM duties will make WTO and FTA-led zero duties meaningless," Ajay Srivastava, former Indian Trade Service officer and co-founder of Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI), said in a note.

Moreover, India is in talks with South Africa, Taiwan, and several developing nations to contest the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism at the WTO. Goyal said the Indian economy is resilient and that the foreign exchange reserves can cover imports for the next five to six years. "While the IMF may have a formula and the RBI may report our \$600 billion foreign exchange reserves as 11 months of imports...which is significantly higher than what most other countries have...my own perspective about our foreign exchange

reserves is that they are now sticky," Goyal said. However, Indian exports are slowing while imports are on the rise. India's trade deficit in October had surged to record levels after a sharp jump in gold imports during the festive season. "In the most difficult situation where interest rates in Europe and the US and other parts of the world were at elevated levels and most people thought that there would be an outflow of foreign exchange, we found that people preferred to stay in India. Therefore, I dare say that if we really look at our foreign exchange reserves, they are enough for the next five to six years without a threat to the economy or foreign currency valuation even if we continue to have our current levels of current account deficit or trade deficit considering the other inflows such as foreign remittances or foreign investment," he added.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 6-12-2023

India, Kenya ink 5 pacts; New Delhi announces USD 250 mn line of credit for Kenyan agri sector

The Kenyan side offered, in line with Kenyan laws, to provide land to Indian companies and institutions for cultivation of crops, including millets

PTI, New Delhi

India on Tuesday announced a USD 250 million line of credit to Kenya for modernisation of its agricultural sector as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Kenyan President William Samoei Ruto agreed to shore up bilateral ties in areas of defence, trade, energy, digital public infrastructure and healthcare.

Following the Modi-Ruto talks, the two sides signed five pacts providing for cooperation in a range of areas including sports, education and digital solution, and unveiled a joint vision document to scale up maritime engagement in the Indian Ocean region.

The Kenyan side offered, in line with Kenyan laws, to provide land to Indian companies and institutions for cultivation of crops, including millets.

In order to enhance bilateral economic engagement as well as to finance projects under development partnership, the two leaders also discussed the need to use local currencies for trade.

In his media statement, Modi said India has been a "reliable and committed" development partner for Kenya and that New Delhi is fully prepared to share its achievements in digital public infrastructure with the east African nation.

"As two agrarian economies, we agreed to share our experiences. We have also decided to provide a Line of Credit (LoC) of USD 250 million to modernise Kenya's agricultural sector," he said.

At a media briefing, Dammu Ravi, secretary (economic relations) in the Ministry of External Affairs, said the Kenyan side offered land for farming by Indian companies under a cooperative model besides showing

interest in India's payment system UPI (Unified Payments Interface).

A joint statement said "Kenya offered, in line with Kenyan laws, to provide land to Indian companies and institutions for cultivation of crops, including millets, in Kenya." "The government of India undertook to encourage Indian companies for investment in the sector, including in equipment and technology on mutually agreed terms. Both sides noted that enhancing bilateral agricultural cooperation would increase bilateral trade and contribute to food security in Kenya," it said.

In his media statement, the prime minister said India and Kenya are "unanimous" that terrorism is the most serious challenge facing humanity and both sides have decided to increase counter-terror cooperation.

"Africa has always been given a high priority position in India's foreign policy. Over the last decade or so, we have increased our cooperation with Africa in mission mode," Modi said.

"Today, we decided to strengthen our cooperation in all fields, laying the foundation for a progressive future. And also identified many new initiatives," he said.

The prime minister said both sides also deliberated on defence cooperation and emphasised on military exercises, capacity building as well as linking the defence industries of both the countries.

He said close cooperation between Kenya and India will strengthen "all our efforts in the Indo-Pacific".

The prime minister said approximately 80,000 people of Indian origin in Kenya, who consider that country as their second home, are the "biggest strength" of the ties.

In the talks, Ruto invited Indian companies to take advantage of the conducive and attractive environment to invest in Kenya, especially in agriculture, manufacturing, pharmaceutical, health, green energy and green mobility sectors.

The joint statement said the Kenyan side thanked India for extending concessional Lines of Credit (LOC) for projects in sectors such as energy and textiles and small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs).

"In supporting agriculture, one of the key pillars of the bilateral partnership, India agreed to extend a new LOC of USD 250 million to the government of Kenya for agricultural mechanisation projects in line with Kenya's national development priorities," it said.

The statement said considering that healthcare and pharmaceutical sectors represent important areas of bilateral trade, both leaders discussed the possibility of facilitating increased Indian investments into Kenya in these sectors, including for development of health infrastructure and medical equipment production.

"This would greatly augment access to affordable healthcare for Kenyans," it said.

On defence cooperation, the joint statement said the two leaders also noted with appreciation the recently concluded MoU between Goa Shipyard Ltd and Kenya Shipyard Ltd that will pave the way for mutually beneficial commercial ventures and also support Kenyan interest in developing shipbuilding, repair, and maintenance capacities.

"Both sides emphasised the urgent need for reform of the United Nations Security Council, in both permanent and non-permanent membership categories, to reflect the current realities and to make it credible, representative and effective," it said.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 6-12-2023

Govt likely to retreat from its quest for higher growth

Rejaul Karim Byron & Refayet Ullah Mirdha

The economy is perhaps slowing, not sprinting. And the government is likely to lower its economic growth target by one percentage point for the fiscal year ending in June, veering from its quest for a higher trajectory in times of austerity.

The fiscal coordination council under the finance ministry may revise the ambitious GDP and inflation targets that were fixed in the national budget in June, considering the existing economic trend. The council will meet tomorrow.

Despite the raging Russia-Ukraine war, the instability in the foreign exchange market and dwindling forex reserves, the government has aimed a GDP growth of 7.5 percent and inflation of 6 percent for 2023-24.

Now, the economic expansion target may be revised down to 6.5 percent while the inflation target may be revised upward to 7 percent as the economy continues to face major challenges while consumer prices show no sign of cooling off.

The economy grew at a pace of 6.03 percent in 2022-23 against the goal of 7.5 percent while the Consumer Price Index rose 9.02 percent against the government's revised target of 7.5 percent.

Both Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office, and Selim Raihan, executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling, said the goals set in the budget were ambitious and unrealistic and they should be revised.

Their suggestions come as key indicators show a disappointing trend.

For example, imports declined 23.73 percent year-on-year in the first quarter of FY24, Bangladesh Bank data showed.

Capital machinery import, which signals the economic growth trend, dropped 40.99 percent in the first four months of the fiscal year, according to the letters of

credit settlement figures of the BB. Industrial raw material import was down 35.72 percent.

The LC opening trend showed that capital machinery imports fell 21 percent in July-October while industrial raw materials imports decreased 16 percent.

The growth in overall export earnings from merchandise shipments decelerated to 1.30 percent in July-November because of a continued slowdown in readymade garment shipments. In November alone, the receipts fell 6.05 percent year-on-year.

A sluggish growth trend is also noticed in other sectors such as the private credit growth as the central bank is following a contractionary monetary policy and has taken steps to lower the demand for loans.

Also, the finance ministry has taken various austerity measures to reduce the pressure on the foreign currency reserves, whose level has more than halved in the past two years and is expected to remain under pressure in the near-term.

“Under the circumstances, the growth target may be revised,” said a finance ministry official.

The International Monetary Fund said the GDP growth is projected to stay at 6 percent in FY24, while inflation is projected to moderate to 7.25 percent by the end of the fiscal year.

The World Bank said the real GDP growth is expected to slow to 5.6 percent and inflation is likely to remain elevated in the near term absent policy tightening, and gradually subside if import prices stabilise.

Zahid Hussain said: “Adequate reform steps were not taken in the budget to achieve the higher GDP and lower inflation targets.”

“Earnings from exports are declining and remittance is falling. The tax-revenue collection has slowed compared to the previous financial year. The same is true for the private sector credit growth.”

Migrant workers sent home \$1.93 billion in November, an increase of 21 percent year-on-year. The receipts, however, were down 2.42 percent from a month ago.

Hussain said only the agriculture sector is doing well on the back of higher production.

“Still, the agricultural sector’s performance alone can’t send the GDP growth beyond 7 percent.”

Hussain said power consumption has increased a bit but it is not enough to pull off the economic expansion target.

Raihan, also a professor of economics, echoed Hussain.

He said the sluggish trend of private investment is standing in the way of achieving the economic growth ambition.

“Inflation stayed above 9 percent in the first five months of the ongoing fiscal year. If the government wants to attain the inflation goal, it will have to limit it to 4 percent in the next six months, but that’s not possible.”

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 15-12-2023

Villagers grow food for all. But they end up paying more for it

In November, prices rose 9.62% in rural areas against national average of 9.49%

Md Asaduz Zaman and Md Abu Talha Sarker

People living in rural Bangladesh have witnessed more erosion in their purchasing power and well-being than the urbanites as the former are paying more for both food and non-food items.

Consumer prices data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) show that inflation in the rural part of the country stayed above the figure in towns and cities in 31 out of 35 months since January 2021.

An elevated level of food price is one of the major drivers for the higher inflation in rural areas although villages, home to nearly 70 percent of Bangladesh’s population, are the major supplier of staple food rice, vegetables, fish and poultry items.

In November, overall prices rose 9.62 percent in rural areas, higher than the national average of 9.49 percent. In contrast, inflation increased 9.16 percent in urban areas.

Rezaul Karim, who lives in Angura Mohammadpur village in Sylhet’s Beanibazar upazila, says he is struggling to run his family as his monthly expenses have increased by Tk 6,000-Tk 7,000 in the last one year.

“Winter vegetables have started to hit the market but prices are still high.”

The 35-year-old says he could purchase a 50kg bag of rice at Tk 1,700 to Tk 1,800 a couple of years ago whereas the same quantity costs Tk 2,800-Tk 2,900 now.

According to the BBS, food inflation in rural areas stood at 10.86 percent in November against 10.58 percent in urban areas.

Amid higher inflation, many people have been forced to cut back on consumption, especially that of non-food items, which has a bearing on the retail sales of clothing and other items in rural markets.

Fakir Alauddin Shaib, a garment and winter clothing retailer at Gilatala, a suburban market in Bagerhat, said people do not have enough income to spend on clothes.

“We had good sales of winter clothes in the same period last year. This year, sales are dull,” he said over the phone yesterday, describing 2023 as worse than the previous year.

Swapan Mirza, who lives at Belkuchi upazila in the northwestern district of Sirajganj, said, “The prices of food items are almost the same in the cities and villages. In some cases, it is higher than in urban centres.”

Against the backdrop of higher prices, a section of people is falling into poverty, according to a paper presented by a researcher of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) at the BIDS Annual Conference on Development a week ago.

The IFPRI said at least 27.51 lakh Bangladeshis fell into poverty in 2022 due to the global food price hike and post-Covid-19 impacts. A global slowdown in 2023 might further worsen the poverty situation in Bangladesh and more than 50,000 people will fall into poverty this year too, it said.

A majority of people falling into poverty anew are from rural areas, it said.

Nationally, the ratio of people below the poverty line stood at 18.7 percent in 2022. It was 20.5 percent in rural areas, according to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2022 by the BBS.

Why is rural inflation high?

Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad, chairman of the Dhaka School of Economics, expressed his surprise at the higher inflation in rural areas than in urban centres, saying there is no concrete answer to this.

“The diversified food basket for rural areas may contribute to higher inflation.”

The BBS uses two sets of commodities (goods and services) to compute the Consumer Price Index for rural and urban areas. A rural basket covers 318 items while the urban basket consists of 422 commodities.

The shortage of supply might be a reason for the price hike as farmers sell products to middlemen at higher rates that are supplied to towns and cities, Prof Ahmad said.

Rizwanul Islam, an economist and a former special adviser for the employment sector at the International Labour Office in Geneva, said food inflation in rural areas outstripping the urban areas is counterintuitive.

“This is because most food items consumed there are presumed to be locally produced, and it is difficult to understand why their prices increased at faster rates than items that have greater weight in the urban food basket.” However, two things might have happened, he said.

First, the consumption pattern may have changed over time, so the conventional assumption may no longer be valid. Second, rural areas may be facing supply bottlenecks to a greater extent than urban centres, resulting in higher paces of price increases.

“These bottlenecks may range from transport costs to extortion on the highways,” Islam added.

Binayak Sen, director-general of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, however, thinks there are benefits from the higher inflation from the producer’s perspective since they get better rates and can adopt developed technologies.

“When inflation rises, we usually discuss the consumer’s side as they are hit financially.”

Mohammad Abdul Malek, a research fellow at the University of Tokyo, said: “If you look at the US economy, you will find similar discrepancies and this happened mainly due to an increase in the prices of transport fuel.”

In the case of Bangladesh, he said, this may be due to a spike in rice prices as it carries a major weight in the food basket.

The rate of coarse grain has crossed Tk 50 a kilogramme for nearly after a year, according to state-run Trading Corporation of Bangladesh.

A top official of the BBS said the state-run statistical agency collects price data and calculates inflation and it doesn’t have any research wing to find out the reasons behind the figures.

Prof Shamsul Alam, a former state minister for planning, said not only food inflation but also general inflation has increased in rural areas.

“The rural inflation is mainly driven by demand-pull inflation.”

He explained that rural incomes have gone up by an increase in the flow of remittances and diversified incomes of rural people and it is evidenced by the mushrooming of retail shops, restaurants, and large markets.

“There is not a single village or locality in Bangladesh that doesn’t receive remittances.”

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 4-12-2023

Foreign investment in stock markets halves

Roadshows bring little benefit

Ahsan Habib

Foreign investment in the stock market of Bangladesh almost halved in the last five years owing to a lingering confidence crisis, the sharp fall in the value of the local currency, and the introduction of a floor price.

Foreign companies and individuals’ investment dropped 20.8 percent year-on-year to \$2.33 billion in the financial year of 2022-23. It was \$4.5 billion in 2018-19, Bangladesh Bank data showed.

Of the sum, \$1.12 billion was invested in debt securities.

“The portfolio investment slumped mainly due to a lack of governance, the depreciation of the taka, and the setting of the floor price,” said Al-Amin, associate professor of the Department of Accounting and Information Systems at the University of Dhaka.

The decline came although the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) held a number of road-shows to attract foreign investors to the stock markets of the country.

Prof Al-Amin said through the road-shows, the regulator portrays a positive image of the country in front of foreign investors. But when they look at the websites of the stock exchanges, they find that junk stocks rule the roost.

“Foreign investors realise that there is a lack of governance in the market. As a result, they don’t feel interested in investing.”

The floor price has also contributed to the denting of investor confidence.

In July 2022, the BSEC set the floor prices for every stock to halt the freefall of indices amid global economic uncertainties brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

In December last year, the regulator lifted the measure for 169 companies in order to bring vibrancy to the market. However, the floor price was reintroduced for all stocks in March this year.

The floor price has turned the market dry since most stocks are not traded.

“Foreign investors don’t like an illiquid market,” Prof Al-Amin said.

Owing to the lower participation of investors in trading activities, the daily average turnover of the Dhaka Stock Exchange plunged 40 percent to Tk 792 crore in the last fiscal year. It was Tk 1,328 crore the year prior.

The 30 percent drop in the taka’s value against the US dollar in the past 18 months has dealt another blow to foreign investors.

“This is because the value of their assets has dropped even if the share prices have remained unchanged. So, foreign investors are selling shares,” he added.

The taka depreciated by around 16 percent to Tk 108 in 2022-23, according to the central bank data.

The BSEC organised road-shows in 15 cities of eight countries from 2021 to 2023, in association with the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority.

“This is not the duty of the BSEC to hold road-shows. Rather, their duty is to ensure good governance in the market and eradicate manipulation,” said a top official of a brokerage firm, preferring anonymity.

“However, the regulator has failed to regulate the market properly. As a result, manipulation is widespread.”

The broker, who deals with foreign investors, also highlighted some of the long-standing issues that have remained unaddressed.

“The number of well-performing companies in the stock market of Bangladesh is small, so global investors don’t want to invest here. Most of the investors don’t trust the financial statements of the listed companies as well.”

The broker said the government changes policies regarding listed companies frequently, which ultimately for impacts the profitability of firms and thus investors. For instance, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission banned Grameenphone, the largest listed company in the country, from selling SIMs in June 2022 for failing to improve the quality of service. The restriction was withdrawn in January this year.

“Foreign investors will not pay heed to the regulator’s plea and come to the market if problems are not dealt with properly,” the broker said.

“If the government can solve the problems and ensure good governance, the regulator will not need to invite investors because they will come to invest in their own interest.”

He said the central bank has kept the taka stronger against foreign currencies through artificial measures.

“The central bank should introduce a market-based exchange rate so that investors don’t need to worry much about any currency swing.”

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 13-12-2023

Policy reforms needed to raise private investment: experts

Star Business Report

Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister M Tofazzel Hossain Miah called for necessary policy reforms and alignment to raise private investment growth in the country.

He also emphasised active initiatives of the private sector alongside government measures aimed to augment private investment.

He made these remarks while speaking at the “Validation Workshop on the Report of the Study on Expanding Private Investment in the Context of LDC Graduation”, held at the NEC conference room at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in the capital yesterday.

The Support to Sustainable Graduation Project (SSGP) of the Economic Relations Division (ERD) organised the event.

Presided over by Md Shahriar Kader Siddiky, secretary of ERD, the workshop was addressed among others by Shaikh Yusuf Harun, executive chairman of Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA), Sharifa Khan, former senior secretary of ERD, Mohsina Yasmin, executive member of Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), Md Sameer Sattar, president of the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), Selim Raihan, executive director of South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM), Farid Aziz, project director of SSGP, and Ferdaus Ara Begum, chief executive officer of Business Initiative Leading Development (BUILD).

Several in-depth sectoral studies are being conducted by the SSGP under the guidance of the National Committee on LDC Graduation to assess the impact of LDC graduation and to formulate relevant strategies accordingly.

As part of that process, a study is being conducted titled “Expanding Private Investment in the Context of LDC Graduation” with SANEM.

The study called for the rationalisation of customs and tax structures, dynamic policy reforms, strengthening industry-academia collaborations for skills development, providing targeted support to export-oriented industries, and enhancing regional economic integration.

Tofazzel emphasised enhancing productivity and decreasing dependency on incentives to prepare the country for the post-LDC scenario and also called for increased investment in research and development in the private sector.

Meanwhile, Siddiky emphasised on creating a business-friendly environment to foster private investment.

In her remarks, Sharifa highlighted the importance of phase-wise implementation of planned economic zones. Harun added that the government was targeting to operationalise four economic zones each year.

Raihan, in his presentation, said that large-scale infrastructure projects were a driving force that accelerated the economic growth of developing countries such as Bangladesh.

In this context, the SANEM executive director noted that private investment growth would largely depend on timely implementation of mega-infrastructure projects.

Sattar said a strong arbitration system needed to be established to resolve business and investment-related disputes, suggesting to revise and update the existing Arbitration Act.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 14-12-2023

Budget 2024 passed with 41 majority

Irangika Range

The Third Reading of the Appropriation Bill (Budget) for the Financial Year 2024 was passed in Parliament yesterday by a majority of 41 votes with amendments.

Accordingly, 122 Members voted in favour while 81 voted against it. TNA Leader R. Sampanthan abstained.

Members of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna UNP MP Vajira Abeywardena and MP Harin Fernando and MP Manusha Nanayakkara, who joined the government from the SJB voted in favour of the budget. Members of the Samagi Janabalawegaya, Jathika Janabalawegaya, Janatha Nidahas Sandhanaya and Tamil National Alliance voted against the Budget

Ruling party member Daina Gamage, SJB MPs Sujith Sanjaya Perera and Rohana Bandara, who were suspended from parliament sittings for one month, were allowed to vote in the Third Reading of the budget.

Government MP Roshan Ranasinghe voted against the budget. MPs A.H.M.Fowzie, Ali Sabry Raheem, Anura Piyadarshana Yapa, Vadivel Suresh, Duminda Dissanayake, Nimal Lanza and W.D.J.Senaviratne also voted in favour of the Budget. President Ranil Wickremesinghe presented the Second Reading of the Appropriation Bill for 2024 to Parliament in his capacity as the Finance Minister on November 13. Thereafter the Second Reading debate of the Appropriation Bill (Budget) was held for seven days excluding Sundays from November 14 to 21.

Thereafter, the Second Reading of the Appropriation Bill was passed in Parliament on November 21 with a majority of 45 votes.

Following the Committee Stage debate of Appropriation Bill for the year 2024 which was held for 19 days from November 22 to yesterday excluding Sundays, the Third Reading vote was held yesterday. After the budget polling, Parliament was adjourned till January 9.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 10-12-2023

Export promotion

An imperative pathway to economic revival

Hermantha Kulantunga

According to the data, export earnings, after a brief period of considerable growth compared to the previous year, are currently showing a declining trend. According to Export Development Board figures, the export earnings from apparel and textiles, the second highest foreign currency earner, have decreased by 20.5 percent year-on-year in October 2023 compared to October 2022. Also, according to the same source, exports of general merchandise have declined by 10.91 percent compared to the value recorded in August 2022.

At this juncture in the country's economy, export earnings play a pivotal role in the balancing act of the troubled economy of Sri Lanka. The promotion of exports stands as a crucial pillar for Sri Lanka's economic recovery and sustained growth.

In the wake of various challenges and setbacks, including the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by the political turmoil that prevailed in 2022, enhancing and expanding export-oriented strategies becomes imperative for steering the country towards an economic resurgence.

The enormous trade deficit or negative balance of trade creates substantially critical setbacks for the Sri Lankan economy. As per the experts, if the country continually runs a trade deficit at the current levels, other countries can acquire funds to buy up capital in the country, a dangerous trend. Through this process, in the long run, foreign investors will eventually own a sizeable portion of the country's economic resources.

On the other hand, export promotion initiatives offer a pathway to diversify Sri Lanka's economy. The country's overreliance on specific industries makes it susceptible to external shocks. By exploring new markets and products, Sri Lanka can reduce its dependency on a limited range of sectors, enhancing its economic resilience.

The country is at a crossroads on foreign exchange and trade balances. The ongoing high trade deficit or negative balance of trade creates substantially critical setbacks for the Sri Lankan economy.

Therefore, a robust export sector is essential for earning foreign exchange, sustaining imports and stabilising the country's balance of payments. A positive trade balance achieved through export promotion can strengthen the country's economic stability.

Increased production

Not only unemployment but also employment layoffs due to the ongoing economic crisis are a burden to the country's economy. The skyrocketing cost of living causes the public immense hardship.

In this context, expanding exports typically lead to increased production, subsequently generating

employment across various skill levels. This job creation is crucial for addressing Sri Lanka's prevailing unemployment concerns and improving the livelihoods of its citizens.

Market access in international trade refers to the ability of businesses and countries to enter foreign markets by overcoming trade barriers, including tariffs and non-tariff barriers. It is crucial for expanding commercial activities, diversifying revenue sources and stimulating economic growth. Developing exports offers the country several benefits, including increased sales opportunities, revenue growth, diversification of markets, job creation and access to new technologies and knowledge from global partners.

At these crucial times, foreign investment can help diversify the domestic economy by introducing new industries and products. This can help reduce reliance on a single industry or export market, which can make the economy more resilient to external distress.

Strong export sector

A strong export sector can attract foreign investors, showcasing Sri Lanka as an attractive destination for foreign direct investment (FDI). A country with a successful track record, despite all the recent drawbacks, exports a conducive business environment, further stimulating economic growth.

Foreign investment can help diversify the domestic economy by introducing new industries and products. This can help reduce reliance on a single industry or export market, which can make the economy more resilient to external shocks.

However, the government must more carefully focus on important factors such as reworking a robust and lasting trade policy, improving logistics and facilitation, avoiding policy uncertainty, offering competitive and innovative export products and addressing labour-related issues to attract more foreign investments.

It is known that the export potential of other products in Sri Lanka needs to be looked at immediately to bridge the gap in lost revenue from apparel exports. Although the disparity between the revenue of apparel and other products is heavy, with the advantage of the reputation Sri Lanka has earned for export commodity quality, a sizeable market share of the global demand for other exportable products can be captured through effective and vibrant promotion campaigns.

Minor export crops are known to possess higher quality than many other competitors in the global market. This can be a force to reckon with in the world market if promoted properly. Export agricultural products such as pepper, cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, coffee and cocoa that have huge world market demand can be some of the marketable products. Even though currently all these products are exported, research reveals that Sri Lanka supplies a fraction of the world's requirements and that a lot more buyers can be attracted.

Market diversification

Both authorities and exporters must concentrate more on market diversification, which can lead to higher growth. Sri Lanka should diversify their exports since this can, for example, help them overcome export instability or the negative impact of terms of trade in primary products. Diversifying export markets beyond traditional destinations is vital. Targeting emerging economies and aggressively promoting Sri Lankan products and services globally will help expand market reach.

The country needs to move beyond traditional sectors such as textiles and tea by diversifying its export portfolio more aggressively. This involves promoting value addition within existing sectors and exploring new high-value export opportunities in areas such as technology, agriculture and services.

As one of the most resilient sectors for earning forex, the authorities must provide more developed facilities such as transportation, logistics and port facilities that are crucial for enhancing the export ecosystem. Efficient infrastructure, which reduces lead times, transportation costs and trade barriers, can make Sri Lankan products more competitive in the global market.

Promotion of exports stands as a decisive strategy for Sri Lanka's economic recovery and long-term growth. By diversifying its economy, earning foreign exchange, creating employment, fostering innovation and integrating into global markets, Sri Lanka can revitalise its economy and position itself as a competitive player on the global stage. Addressing challenges and implementing comprehensive export promotion strategies is a key to unlocking the country's full export potential and achieving sustainable economic prosperity.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 4-12-2023

PM, EU Envoy discuss cooperation in exports, wellness tourism and higher education

European Union Ambassador Carmen Moreno called on Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena at Temple Trees on December 1.

The Prime Minister welcomed Ambassador Moreno and Lars Bredal, deputy head of the EU delegation and expressed sincere gratitude for the EU assistance extended during the difficult period in Sri Lanka.

The PM recalled the strong relationship between EU and Sri Lanka over decades and thanked the EU for the concessions provided through the GSP Plus facility for Sri Lankan exports to the European market. Specially, he emphasized the export of textile products and fisheries products to EU countries. He also urged to explore the possibility of export of cinnamon and agriculture products to the EU market.

The cooperation with universities of the EU countries for education sector development of Sri Lanka was also taken into consideration and the Ambassador also assured her support for enhancing the ties with EU universities.

The Ambassador explained the possible assistance that the EU Global Gateway strategy encourages in areas such as public and private investment in infrastructure, green energy, and education and research for sustainable development.

The possibility of partnering with the European Investment Bank in securing investment-related loans for green transition, digitalization, connectivity, health, education and research and innovations was also taken into consideration.

Further, the Ambassador highlighted the potential opportunities in the field of tourism (specially wellness tourism) and fisheries production and guaranteed the EU commitments for assistance to Sri Lanka for the same.

It was agreed that a guarantee fund will be established with EU support for the investment guarantee for investors with special concern to investors from EU countries.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 3-12-2023

Empowering entrepreneurs

It's important to lower taxes or offer tax breaks to support the growth of MSMEs.

Nepal's economic landscape is dominated by micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which are crucial contributors to the nation's economy. As per the National Economic Census, 2018, of the 923,356 establishments in 2018, 95.5 percent were micro enterprises, 4.2 percent were small enterprises, and the remaining were medium and large-sized enterprises, with only half of them registered. Further, this sector provides employment opportunities to 84.7 percent of Nepal's labour force. However, it exhibits a gender imbalance, with a male-female ratio of 62:38 in employment and an even greater disparity of around 73:27 in ownership and managerial roles.

The contribution of MSMEs to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is substantial, accounting for nearly 90 percent of the industrial sector's input, which itself constitutes about 5.6 percent of the total GDP. However, post-Covid, from mid-October 2022-23 to mid-October 2023-24, Nepal's MSMEs faced challenges, marked by high inflation and borrowing costs. Such challenges must be addressed to fully realise their potential and contribute effectively to Nepal's economic development.

High inflation and borrowing costs

As per the current Nepal Rastra Bank Macroeconomic and Financial Situation study, the consumer price index (CPI)

averaged around 8 percent, with the food CPI increasing from 8.05 percent to 8.38 percent, escalating raw material costs and squeezing profit margins for food-related businesses. Conversely, the non-food CPI decreased from 8.85 percent to 6.81 percent, offering some relief to MSMEs in other sectors. This complex inflationary trend significantly impacted MSMEs, influencing their pricing strategies and operational costs. Concurrently, higher interest rate trends in 2023 added to their woes. The weighted average lending rate for commercial banks consistently stayed above 12 percent, while rates for development banks and finance companies were even higher, hovering above 13 percent and 14 percent, respectively. This situation suggests a more expensive borrowing environment for MSMEs dependent on these financial institutions, critically affecting their financial planning and cost management strategies.

Financing gap Compounding the financial challenges is a \$3.56 billion financing gap in the MSME sector, as revealed by a United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) study. This gap, divided between micro enterprises (MEs) and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), underscores the acute need for increased financial access and support. However, the current portfolios of SMEs in commercial banks and MEs in microfinance institutions (MFIs) suggest significant untapped potential for financing within the existing regulatory framework.

Recent concessional loan trends in Nepal reflect changing dynamics in entrepreneurship. From mid-July 2022 to mid-October 2023, women entrepreneur loans decreased, both in number (from 84,001 to 81,121) and amount (from Rs70,996.1 million to Rs54,028.3 million), signalling concerns about gender inclusivity. Meanwhile, Youth Self-employment Loans increased (from 28 to 47 borrowers), indicating a growing interest among young entrepreneurs. However, loan amounts for educated youth self-employment slightly declined, pointing to more educated individuals engaging in smaller-scale self-employment. These trends necessitate tailored support and policies to nurture diverse entrepreneurial groups.

Other challenges

The procedural complexity can be challenging for entrepreneurs unfamiliar with formal ways of doing business, discouraging many from seeking assistance from banks and other financial institutions. Even those who seek financial aid have to deal with unnecessary hurdles. The government allows loans of up to Rs2.5 million for eligible startups. Despite the government's directive to provide loans without collateral for small startups, banks favour established and well-off

businesses rather than those with high potential requiring immediate financial assistance.

The registration process of new businesses involves multiple venues and departments, each with its own separate process. Apart from that, businesses have to be registered with their respective wards. This process becomes cumbersome for aspirants with limited resources and can be discouraging for those contemplating starting a small enterprise.

Furthermore, the tax regime disproportionately impacts small businesses with

its high rental taxes and yearly registration fees. Once registered, a business must

regularly shell out cash for tax, irrespective of its operational status or profitability. This burden is particularly heavy for small businesses during their formative phase.

The recent ban on TikTok, a platform that had significantly boosted self-employment and the growth of new businesses, has impacted many entrepreneurs. It had become an indispensable tool for small business owners as it influences market demand for products and services through quick marketing.

Addressing challenges

In Nepal, creating a robust MSME ecosystem at the macro level involves integrating key elements like streamlining processes through initiatives such as the one-stop

service centre for domestic businesses, expanding loan quotas and implementing nationwide financial literacy programmes that empower more entrepreneurs to seek credit. Tax reforms are crucial to alleviate financial pressures on small businesses, and strategies to connect SMEs directly with consumers promote more affordable consumption. To support the growth of MSMEs, it's important to consider lower taxes for these businesses than larger companies or offer tax breaks for sectors deemed priorities.

Moreover, a provision for flexible repayment instalments over a certain period could encourage struggling businesses to sustain themselves. Additionally, harnessing financial technologies and implementing demand-side initiatives, such as financial literacy, to encourage digital

technology can provide targeted support for MSMEs.

As Nepal prepares to transition from the Least Developed Countries category by 2026, it must confront challenges such as losing preferential market access to the European Union. We should actively pursue new trade agreements with the EU and other countries, particularly those with growing economies and high demand for Nepali products, and, if possible, gain access to preferential tariffs.

Robust development and support of MSMEs are essential for Nepal's economic and social advancement. Addressing challenges such as high inflation, substantial financing gap, procedural complexities, and impending

loss of preferential market access requires a multifaceted approach. This includes streamlining business processes, expanding loan access, tax reforms, and creating a supportive financing ecosystem. Embracing these strategies is key to transforming MSMEs into thriving contributors to Nepal's economy, fostering innovation and inclusive growth.

NISCHAL DHUNGEL & SURYA KIRAN YADAV

Dhungel has an MSc in Economic Theory and Policy from Bard College, New York, and Yadav holds an MA in International Relations from the University of York, UK.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 15-12-2023

Nepal's forex reserves rise to a record \$12.75 billion

Economists, however, warn the piling up of foreign exchange reserves is a warning sign of a potential recession.

Post Report

KATHMANDU, The central bank said that Nepal's gross foreign exchange reserves increased 8.9 percent to an all-time high of \$12.75 billion in mid-November, boosted by remittances.

Economists, however, have warned that the piling up of foreign exchange reserves is a warning sign of a potential recession.

"As imports are dropping, foreign exchange reserves are increasing. This is a warning sign for our consumption-based economy," said Nara Bahadur Thapa, former executive director at the Nepal Rastra Bank.

A high level of imports indicates robust domestic demand and a growing economy.

"But if these imports are mainly productive assets, such as machinery and equipment, this is even more favourable for the country since productive assets will improve the economy's productivity in the long run," said Thapa.

The central bank said that merchandise imports decreased 3.8 percent to Rs512.50 billion.

Imports of readymade garments, MS wire rods, bars, and coils, electrical equipment, textiles, and aircraft spare parts, among others, increased, whereas imports of crude soybean oil, gold, petroleum products, crude palm oil, and MS billet, among others decreased.

According to the Nepal Rastra Bank, its reserves increased 10.8 percent to Rs1.49 trillion in mid-November, from Rs1.34 trillion in mid-July, the beginning of the current fiscal year.

Similarly, the reserves held by banks and financial institutions increased 6.4 percent to Rs205.95 billion in mid-November from Rs193.59 billion in mid-July.

Foreign exchange reserves are assets held on reserve by a central bank in foreign currencies. Foreign exchange reserves are central bank funds used to make sure there's enough foreign currency to pay for imports. Based on the imports of four months of 2023-24, the

foreign exchange reserves of the banking sector are sufficient to cover the prospective merchandise imports of 13.6 months and merchandise and services imports of 11.3 months.

With money piling up in the banks, and imports dropping, it has affected the consumption, the lifeline of Nepal's economy.

Thapa said consumption is an engine that drives economic growth, particularly for a country where there is low production and export.

"Money comes from abroad as remittance and makes the market vibrant in Nepal," said Thapa.

"Now consumption is down because young people are leaving the country on a massive scale, which obviously will hit the retail sector." Lack of opportunities at home pushed nearly a million Nepalis to try their luck abroad in the last fiscal year.

The out-migration trend has not stopped. In the first four months of the current fiscal year, the number of Nepali workers—both institutional and individual—taking first-time approval for foreign employment stood at 137,475 and taking approval for renewed entry stood at 68,841.

This means more than 200,000 Nepalis already left the country in the first four months.

Their departure, however, has increased the remittance inflows, growing 26.4 percent to Rs477.96 billion in the review period.

Due to the low demand, construction, mining, and quarrying sectors are in the doldrums. Crash in the stock market, real estate, and low business confidence have rattled the economy.

When young people leave the country, its repercussions start to be visible in consumption. People hardly show up in major markets to buy mobile phones, cars, furniture, gold, and clothes.

"The colleges are empty," said Thapa. "The hospitals are also struggling to remain afloat." The once-booming restaurants too are struggling to get young customers.

Finance Minister Prakash Sharan Mahat on Wednesday, however, claimed that the country's economy is on the "right track".

There is no money in the market. Where is the money going then?

Thapa said money is being spent on smuggling the gold. Nepal's infamy as a hub for gold smuggling, which reached a new high back in July after the seizure of 60kg of gold, continues to grow. "Tonnes and tonnes of gold are being smuggled. This will rattle the economy," said Thapa. The borrowings of the banks, too, are not healthy.

Private sector credit from the banking and financial institutions increased Rs99.40 billion, or 2.1 percent in the review period. On a year-on-year basis, credit to the private sector from banking and financial institutions increased by 4.4 percent in mid-November.

The foreign direct investment, too, has slowed. In the review period, net foreign direct investment remained at Rs3.64 billion.

The central bank report, however, shows that the current account remained at a surplus of Rs96.38 billion in the review period against a deficit of Rs37.79 billion in the same period of the previous year. The balance of payments remained at a surplus of Rs147.11 billion in the review period against a surplus of Rs20.03 billion in the previous year.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 8-12-2023

Cabinet nod for Indian plan to increase aid for small projects in Nepal

Allocations for different types of local units and their share of costs are yet to be settled.

ANIL GIRI

KATHMANDU, The government has agreed to accept India's proposal to increase the budget for 'small development projects' to be implemented by local units from the current Rs50 million to Rs200 million.

The Indian side had initially proposed jacking up the budget to Rs240 million, but the Ministry of Finance had scaled it down by Rs40 million. Nepal suggested the reduction citing a financial burden as, under existing arrangements, it has to bear 20 percent of project costs, officials said.

Thursday's Cabinet meeting agreed in principle to accept the Indian proposal, with some minor changes, a minister said.

Details of how much a metropolitan city, a sub-metropolitan city, a municipality and a rural municipality will receive under the small development projects scheme and how much each local unit will contribute to the project cost is yet to be settled. It will be decided in consultations with relevant ministries, the minister added.

"The higher cap for such a project is Rs200 million," the minister said, adding, "each local body must ensure that any small development project to be funded under the scheme does not exceed this threshold."

Some ministers at the cabinet meeting suggested different budget limits for different types of local units.

"As rural municipalities operate with smaller budgets compared to metropolitan cities, sub-metropolitan cities, and municipalities, the budget limit for small projects in rural municipalities should be fixed at Rs50 million," the minister said.

To bolster his argument, the minister said that local units getting the Indian grant should also contribute a portion of project cost from their own resources, and it will be difficult for many rural municipalities operating on small budgets to make such contributions to high-cost projects.

Earlier, Finance Minister Prakash Sharan Mahat confirmed to the Post that his ministry had given its nod to increase the grant disbursed under the Indian small

development project scheme. A memorandum of understanding on the increase will soon be signed, said Mahat.

India had initially proposed a grant of IRs150 million or NRs240 million for each project, but before tabling the proposal, the Ministry of Finance has trimmed it to Rs200 million citing the requirement for contributions, according to finance ministry sources.

The Indian side, during Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's India visit in May-June, had expressed its desire to significantly increase the budget for the small development project scheme in Nepal. According to a bilateral arrangement, the scheme, which was launched in 2003, had to be renewed every three years. But after the renewal in 2014, no projects were executed until 2017. The scheme was extended in 2017, and later again in 2020, with some amendments.

According to the Ministry of Urban Development, with the change in the country's governance system, the responsibility for project implementation was handed over to district coordination committees.

"As the Constitution of Nepal 2015 barred direct donations of funds to the local level, there was a hiatus in project implementation. The Cabinet decision of December 23, 2019 approved the new implementation modality and appointed the implementing agencies, paving the way for the resumption of project implementation," stated the ministry.

As per the new modality, the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration (MoFAGA) acts as the coordinating agency between local governments and the Nepal-based Indian embassy. The project proposals that the MoFAGA receives from local governments are sent to the Ministry of Finance, which forwards them to the Indian embassy for implementation.

"After this, a tripartite agreement has to be signed among the MoFAGA, Indian embassy, and concerned local units for project implementation. The existing modality stipulated that the local government should bear 20 percent of the total project cost," said the urban development ministry.

"With the new budgetary arrangement, the scope of the projects will increase. The cost of construction materials and worker wages have gone up significantly in recent years, so the Indian decision to increase the budget is practical too," an official at the Finance Ministry added. India has been building schools and hospitals and other small projects under the scheme. The proposed adjustments are expected to address resource shortfalls for the execution of internal infrastructure projects or for acquiring necessary equipment for the projects, officials said.

Formerly known as small development project scheme and launched in November 2003, the Indian side has rebranded it as High-impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs).

HICDPs are short-gestation projects with a maximum financial outlay of NRs50 million, according to the Indian embassy website.

Since 2003, over 535 HICDPs have been taken up by the government of India of which 476 have been completed while 59 are ongoing, and the total cost of all projects is around NPR 11.55 billion, the website said.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 13-12-2023

India to expand activities in

Iran's free zones

TEHRAN – The secretary of Iran's Free Zones High Council has traveled to India to meet and hold talks with Indian officials to develop cooperation between the two countries in free zones, Freena reported.

Hojatollah Abdolmaleki arrived in India on Monday and on the first day of his visit met with Iran's Ambassador to Delhi Iraj Elahi in which the officials explored the ways of boosting cooperation between Iran and India in the Islamic Republic's free zones.

Abdolmaleki also met and held talks with the representatives of one of India's largest steel companies, during which he invited the Indian side to invest in Iran's free zones.

Considering the low production costs and the ease of doing business, import and export, and suitable infrastructures that exist in the free and special economic zones of Iran, including the Chabahar Free Zone, the Indian production group expressed its interest in investing in the production of downstream steel products in Iran's free and special economic zones.

Last week, Abdolmaleki outlined 10 new strategies to increase investment and export in the country's free and special economic zones.

He made the remarks in a meeting with the deputy heads of the country's free zones on the sidelines of the second EAEU Exclusive exhibition in Tehran on Thursday (December 7).

Abdolmaleki stated that the mentioned strategies mainly focus on a network of cooperation among the investment and economic departments of the country's free zones.

"Joint marketing between the free zones in the fields of income, investment, logistics, and export is the main purpose of the said network," he explained.

Implementing a comprehensive plan for developing logistics and re-export from free zones by using the capacities of combined transport and transit among free zones is another part of the mentioned strategies, the official said.

"The third strategy is the use of the capacity of international organizations and agreements such as the Eurasian Economic Union, Shanghai, BRICS, ECO, etc.," he added.

The official stated that identifying the advantages and distinctive features of free zones and introducing them to each other to benefit from the relative advantages of

each zone in the network structure is another part of the mentioned coordinated strategies.

“The fifth strategy is to use the passenger goods model to maximize the income of free zone organizations and the sixth strategy, is to attend exhibitions and domestic and international business events to introduce the investment opportunities of free zones in line with the continuation of the path taken this year,” Abdolmaleki said.

The seventh strategy would be to determine a supply chain of goods among free zones in such a way that goods are exchanged, sold, or supplied in a cooperative network, the official said, adding: “using China's One Belt One Road plan with a focus on free zones, determining a comprehensive tourism network of free and special zones to outline the common interests and goals are the eighth and ninth parts of this program; and monetary, banking, and financial cooperation in the form of drawing up a cooperation style sheet to finance construction projects and investment is the tenth strategy.”

The establishment of free trade zones (FTZs) in Iran dates back to the Iranian calendar year 1368 (March 1989 - March 1990) following the fall in the country's oil income in the preceding year which prompted the government to promote non-oil exports.

The first two free trade zones of Iran were established in the south of the country. The first one was Kish Free Trade Zone established in 1368 on Kish Island in the Persian Gulf and the second one was Qeshm Free Trade Zone established the year after on Qeshm Island in the Strait of Hormuz.

Some five other free trade zones have been also established in the country since then, including Chabahar in southeastern Sistan-Baluchestan Province, Arvand in southwestern Khuzestan Province, Anzali in northern Gilan Province, Aras in East-Azerbaijan Province and Maku in West-Azerbaijan Province, both in the northwest of the country.

The development of existing free trade zones and the establishment of new FTZs has become one of the major economic approaches of the Iranian government.

EF/MA

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 4-12-2023

TPO holds conference on Iran-Saudi Arabia trade opportunities

TEHRAN – Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) in collaboration with Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (TCCIMA) held a conference on the Iran-Saudi Arabia trade opportunities in Tehran on Sunday.

In this event which was attended by Iranian business operators and entrepreneurs interested in trade with the kingdom, the ways of expanding economic relations

between the two countries were explored, the TCCIMA portal reported.

Speaking in this conference, Abdol-Amir Rabihavi, the director general of TPO's West Asia Office, pointed to the benefits of increasing economic and trade relations with Saudi Arabia and stressed the important role of the private sector in developing trade relations with this country.

Stating that the private sector is more agile in economic exchanges and has fewer bureaucratic restrictions, Rabihavi said: “The participation of the private sector will be the basis for the expansion of business relations with Saudi Arabia.”

EF/MA

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 10-12-2023

Iran, Syria ink 6 economic, trade co-op MOUs

TEHRAN- Iran and Syria signed six memorandums of understanding (MOUs) on economic and trade cooperation on Saturday.

The MOUs were inked by Iranian First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber and Syrian Prime Minister Hussein Arnous in a ceremony at the end of the meeting of the two countries' Joint Economic Committee in Tehran.

As reported, Iran's ministers of industry, mining and trade, energy, finance and economic affairs, sport and youth, agriculture, oil, and culture, as well as the governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) were present in the signing ceremony of the mentioned MOUs.

Addressing the meeting of the two countries' Joint Economic Committee, Iran's Transport and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash, who is the co-chairman of the Iran-Syria Joint Economic Committee has announced that the two sides will soon begin establishing joint insurance and banking institutes as well as free trade zones.

The official expressed satisfaction with the implementation of previous agreements between the two nations.

Syrian Minister of Economy and Foreign Trade Mohammad Samer Khalil, who co-chairs the Iran-Syria Joint Economic Committee, declared both parties' plans to pursue joint ventures such as setting up free trade zones and joint insurance and banking institutes.

The Syrian official also said the two sides have reached a good consensus regarding the guidelines of the free trade agreement, and the framework of cooperation between central banks, as well as tourism, and transportation sectors.

MA

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 4-12-2023**Interest payments remain a challenge as govt paints rosy economic picture****Khaleeq Kiani**

ISLAMABAD: Painting a positive overall macroeconomic picture, the caretaker government is now hoping for a downhill journey from the painful inflation rate and a further increase in economic activities over the coming months.

“Pakistan’s economy is on a gradual but promising path to recovery. The stride of economic revival initiatives is driving a surge in economic activity,” said the Economic Advisers’ Wing of the Ministry of Finance in its monthly Economic Update & Outlook, but warned that higher mark-up payments could put significant pressure on expenditures.

It said the positive economic signals and recovery indicators had triggered market sentiment, propelling the Karachi Stock Exchange Index by over 33pc in November and surpassing the 60,000-point mark for the first time in history.

It attributed the market sentiment to a sustained monetary policy stance and successful IMF staff review in November and noted that the exchange rate remained stable, owing to reforms in exchange companies and a reduction in illicit transactions, which exerted a positive impact on overall economic activity.

Surprisingly, the Ministry of Finance refrained from utilising the economic performance data, approved last week by the National Accounts Committee (NAC), that put the gross domestic product growth rate at 2.13pc for the first quarter of the current fiscal year, and continued to flag higher mark-up payments as major challenges to the fiscal position, albeit in a sugarcoated manner.

“Despite better fiscal accounts during the first quarter of the current fiscal year, higher mark-up payments may put significant pressure on the expenditure side. However, it is expected that effective fiscal management through robust growth in revenues and a cautious expenditure approach will navigate potential challenges and maintain positive momentum in the fiscal sector”, it said.

Similarly, although the Ministry of Finance released its monthly report in December, most of the data it used for economic performance pertained to October, although a lot of the data for November is now publicly available – particularly relating to inflation, imports, exports, foreign exchange position, revenues and so on.

During the first four months of FY2024, the overall performance of the economy is encouraging as the monthly economic indicator (MEI) continued to be positive in October 2023, driven by a notable improvement in key indicators of economic activity.

The outlook report said the better performance of the large-scale manufacturing (LSM) sector, fueled by positive trends in high frequency data, a steady uptick in imports, and improvement in composite leading

indicator (CLI) of Pakistan’s major export markets were providing impetus to overall economic activity.

“All these gains are also reflected in improved fiscal and external accounts position”, it said, also noting the positive impact of the staff-level agreement reached with the IMF on November 15 on the feel-good environment.

The ministry said the IMF programme supported the government’s commitment to advance planned fiscal consolidation, accelerate cost-reducing reforms in the energy sector, complete the return to a market-determined exchange rate, pursue SOEs and governance reforms to attract investment and support job creation while continuing to strengthen social assistance.

At the same time, the execution of the FY2024 budget with continued adjustment of energy prices, and renewed flows into the foreign exchange (FX) market have lessened fiscal and external pressures.

Furthermore, inflationary pressures are receding and the outlook has improved. Inflation is expected to decline over the coming months amid receding supply constraints and modest demand. With all these positive developments, further improvement in domestic economic activities is anticipated in upcoming months.

The stability in the exchange rate, ease in supply disruptions due to the removal of import restrictions, and improved dollar liquidity contributed to this economic upswing particularly relating to return of the positive trend in LSM after several months of decline.

In the agriculture sector, the input situation shows positive signs. Farm tractor production and sales witnessed growth of 55.1pc (17,098) and 86.8pc (17,296), respectively during July-October FY2024 over the corresponding period last year.

On the fiscal front, healthy growth in revenues outpaced the growth in expenditure during the first quarter of FY2024. Both tax and non-tax collection attributed to a significant rise in total revenues, however, a substantial increase in non-tax collection on the back of higher receipts from petroleum levy remained the major source of the increase. Thus, with healthy growth in revenues relative to expenditures, the fiscal deficit reduced to 0.9pc of GDP in July-Sept FY2024 from 1pc of GDP last year.

It noted food, beverages, housing, gas, fuel, water, transport and household equipment as major drivers of sustained headline inflation but hoped that keeping in view the crop cycle of perishables, the supply pressures would be relieved from the end of November and onwards. Moreover, the stability/reduction in fuel prices would help further easing out inflationary pressures.

The monetary policy rate was maintained at 22pc, owing to the significant performance of high-frequency indicators and improved inflation outlook. “Overall, positive economic signals and recovery indicators are steering the improvement in the GDP outlook for the fiscal year”, it concluded.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 4-12-2023

Pakistan, KSA reach consensus for free trade deal with GCC

Monitoring Desk

Commerce minister Dr Ejaz says both sides held productive discussions towards finalising the investment-related agreement Solangi terms this a major development towards attracting huge investments in country.

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have reached a consensus on the investment modalities, paving the way for the ratification of a much-awaited free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council, a development that has been pending for the last 19 years.

“If approved, this will mark the first trade and investment agreement that the GCC has entered into with any country in the past 15 years,” said Caretaker Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting Murtaza Solangi Sunday in a post on X.

Currently, an important Pakistani delegation led by Commerce and Industries Minister Dr Gohar Ejaz is in Saudi Arabia where they held talks with the GCC’s chief negotiator to finalise the investment-related part of the GCC Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Sharing the details of the meetings in Saudi Arabia on his X handle, the commerce minister said, “Productive discussions in Saudi Arabia as we work towards finalising the investment-related part of the GCC Free Trade Agreement.” The minister was confident that this agreement will strengthen economic ties between Pakistan and the GCC, fostering new opportunities for trade and investment.

The agreed investment chapter is now set to be presented to the GCC ministers for approval, which was already included in the meeting’s agenda. The GCC Secretariat has the authority to sign the agreement on behalf of the six-member GCC countries. If approved, this will mark the first trade and investment agreement that the GCC has entered into with any country in the past 15 years. According to a statement issued by the ministry, the technical teams from the two sides held extensive discussions on the remaining details of the investment chapter, including investment protection and facilitation. They also discussed the potential impact of the FTA on bilateral trade and investment flows. “This is a major step forward in our efforts to strengthen economic ties between Pakistan and the GCC,” said Ejaz. The investment chapter is an important part of the agreement, and we are confident that we can reach an agreement soon, the minister said. The GCC FTA is expected to boost trade and investment between Pakistan and the GCC. The agreement is also expected

to create new jobs and opportunities for businesses in both regions. The two sides also discussed the possibility of holding a joint business forum shortly and to promote trade and investment between Pakistan and the GCC. In September, Pakistan agreed on the FTA with the GCC. However, the signing of the agreement was postponed as Saudi Arabia demanded to incorporate an investment chapter into the agreement. This chapter was particularly aimed at including a protection clause, specifically the provision of the forum of the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID). In August 2004, Pakistan and the GCC, which includes Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait, signed a framework agreement to explore the possibility of an FTA. However, only a handful of negotiation rounds occurred in the years that followed. The dialogue was revived in 2021 after a substantial hiatus. In the previous year, both parties conducted technical-level discussions to assess the feasibility of finalising the agreement. This potential agreement could significantly enhance Pakistan’s export capacity to the GCC bloc.

PEOPLE’S DAILY, CHINA 2-12-2023

Commentary: Upturn in Chinese economy boosts world's confidence

BEIJING, (Xinhua) -- After some setbacks on the post-COVID 19 recovery path, the Chinese economy has once again shown its resilience and great potential as it regained momentum in the third quarter, expanding by a higher-than-expected 5.2 percent.

Against the backdrop of multiple uncertainties in the global economy, many international institutions have recently upgraded China's economic growth forecasts, with the figures for 2023 all above 5 percent. Some analysts have predicted an even higher growth for 2024.

These positive signs, which came as a result of a series of forceful and pragmatic policies and measures implemented by the Chinese government to stabilize growth and promote an opening-up, have not only given the world a great boost of confidence, but also once again proved the vicious "China collapse" rhetoric wrong.

Since the beginning of this year, the global economy has been struggling under the impact of geopolitical crises, the spillover effect of the U.S. fiscal and monetary policies, and the so-called "de-risking" of supply chains by some Western countries.

The Chinese economy has also met with many challenges: persistent global inflationary pressure, a deteriorating trade environment, and sluggish international market demand, among others. To

overcome the difficulties, China has given priority to stability while pursuing progress, rolling out a comprehensive package of macro-control policies.

Since the second quarter, the United Nations has taken the lead in raising China's economic growth forecast for this year. Recently after the release of the faster-than-expected figures for the third quarter, more institutions have followed suit.

In its mid-year update of the World Economic Situation and Prospects 2023, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs raised its forecast for China's economic growth this year to 5.3 percent from 4.8 at the beginning of the year. The International Monetary Fund recently announced that it expects China's economy to grow by 5.4 percent in 2023, higher than previously expected. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development raised the figure to 5.2 percent from 5 percent. Morgan Stanley raised its forecast to 5.1 percent from 4.8-4.9 percent. Citigroup raised its forecast to 5.3 percent from 5 percent.

These bullish predictions have a solid basis. Figures from the National Statistics Office show that China's gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 5.2 percent year-on-year in the first three quarters of this year, one of the fastest among major economies in the world. From January to October, 41,947 new foreign-invested enterprises were established in China, up 32.1 percent year on year. The actual investment in China by Canada, Britain, France, Switzerland and the Netherlands increased by 110.3 percent, 94.6 percent, 90.0 percent, 66.1 percent and 33.0 percent, respectively.

Marcos Pires, director of the Institute of Economics and International Studies at Sao Paulo State University in Brazil, said that China's economy is not only growing steadily, but also improving in quality. China's clean energy sector, driven by the rapid development of new energy power generation equipment, battery and electric vehicle industries, "has become the undisputed leader in the world in just a few years."

The accelerating recovery of the Chinese economy pronounced the failure of the so-called "de-coupling" or "de-risking" tricks by some Western politicians. They might create a temporary headwind down the road, but China's vigorous economic development and its mutually-beneficial cooperation with the outside world won't be stopped.

"Since the beginning of this year, the media and politicians of some Western countries, including the United States, have said that China's economy is about to collapse, that China's economy is a time bomb, and that Chinese cities have become ghost cities," said renowned Australian economist Guo Shengxiang.

"These statements are pompous and out of touch with common sense."

China's economy has its own cycle, and the main direction is "upward," Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University in the United States, said. In the next 30 years, China will be a leader in digital technology, electric vehicles, renewable energy and many other fields of science and technology, he told Xinhua.

This year marks the 45th anniversary of China's opening-up policy. In recent years, China has been intensifying moves to promote a high-quality opening-up, setting up more and greater platforms for win-win cooperation for all parties, and earning more trust from the international community. China applies the highest standards in implementing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement, and has taken proactive steps to align its economic and trade rules with the high standards of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Digital Economic Partnership Agreement, improved the mechanism for protecting the rights and interests of foreign investment, further reduced the negative list for foreign investment access, and worked hard to break down barriers that restrict the flow of innovation factors.

More and more business people around the world are now assured of China's steadfast determination and capability to continuously push forward its opening-up and sincerity in contributing to global development from a win-win approach. The "next China" is still China, they say. "Investing in China is investing in the future," they also say.

"China's commitment to high-level openness will benefit the entire world," said Jim Rogers, a world-renowned investor and financial commentator.

Indeed, the institutional advantages of the socialist market economy, the strengths of its enormous market, the supply advantages of a full-fledged industrial system, and the talent advantages of a large number of high-quality workers and entrepreneurs are the basis for China's economy to forge ahead, and have been increasingly recognized by the outside world.

"China is now the economically indispensable nation in the world," said Khairy Tourk, professor of Economics at Illinois Institute of Technology.

Although there will be various setbacks and difficulties on the way forward, China has chosen the right development path and direction, and promoting a high-level opening-up will make China one of the most important and successful countries in the world in the 21st century, said Rogers.

	DEFENCE, NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT, SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND SPACE TECHNOLOGY			
	Subject	Newspapers/Periodicals	Date	Page
	INDIA Defence Procurement/Modernization			
1.	97 more Tejas, 155 copters: MoD's nod to Rs 2.23L cr buy list - Tribune News Service	The Tribune, Chandigarh	1-12-2023	55
2.	Army shortlists 22 equipment for surveillance, information collation By Ajay Banerjee	The Tribune, Chandigarh	10-12-2023	55
3.	India successfully conducts training launch of short-range ballistic missile Agni-1 - PTI	The Telegraph, Kolkata	8-12-2023	55
4.	For Navy, small aircraft carriers limit options By Abhijit Singh	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	5-12-2023	56
5.	3 India-made naval ships launched in Kochi - IANS Defence Affairs/Cooperation	Greater Kashmir, Srinagar	1-12-2023	57
6.	Nigeria, Philippines, Argentina showing interest in procuring Tejas jets: HAL chief - PTI Indian Space Program	The Telegraph, Kolkata	8-12-2023	57
7.	Solar wind particle experiment payload onboard Aditya-L1 starts operations: ISRO - PTI	The Telegraph, Kolkata	3-12-2023	57
8.	Aditya-L1 mission: ISRO activates second instrument on solar spacecraft By Shobhit Gupta	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	3-12-2023	58
9.	ISRO moves Chandrayaan-3 module to orbit around earth - PTI BANGLADESH Defence Procurement/Modernization/Planning	The Tribune, Chandigarh	6-12-2023	58
10.	Army gets unmanned combat aerial vehicles Staff Correspondent	The Daily Star, Dhaka	5-12-2023	59
11.	Reasons for Bangladesh to have a Strong Navy By Rajeev Ahmed SRI LANKA Defence Procurement/Modernization/Planning	The Daily Star, Dhaka	15-12-2023	59
12.	SLAF gets two Harbin Y-12 IV aircraft Editorial	Daily News, Colombo	7-12-2023	60
13.	Navy takes hold of four poaching trawlers	Daily News, Colombo	7-12-2023	60

	Defence Affairs/Cooperation			
14.	Sri Lanka Navy celebrates 73rd Anniversary	Daily News, Colombo	9-12-2023	61
15.	Army Commander Welcomed in India & Meets India's Chief of the Army Staff IRAN Defence Affairs/Cooperation	Daily News, Colombo	5-12-2023	61
16.	Iran, Saudi Arabia discuss military cooperation PAKISTAN Defence Procurement/Modernization/Planning	Tehran Times, Tehran	2-12-2023	62
17.	PN inducts 5th ATR aircraft to carry out reconnaissance at sea By Muhammad Anis Defence Affairs/Cooperation	The News, Islamabad	6-12-2023	62
18.	US defence secretary hosts army chief By Anwar Iqbal	Dawn, Islamabad	14-12-2023	63
19.	China, Vietnam coast guards hold high-level working meeting, consolidating traditional friendship and promoting maritime cooperation By Hu Yuwei and Fan Wei in Guangzhou CHINA	Global Times, China	9-12-2023	63
20.	Long March rockets mark their 500th spaceflight By Zhao Lei	People's Daily, China	11-12-2023	64

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 1-12-2023
97 more Tejas, 155 copters: MoD's nod to Rs 2.23L cr buy list

400 artillery guns also to be procured

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, The Defence Acquisition Council (DAC), the apex decision-making body of the Ministry of Defence (MoD), today okayed the procurement of 97 more fighter jets, 155 armed helicopters and 400 artillery guns.

98% equipment to be sourced locally

DAC okayes proposals worth Rs 2.23 lakh crore, of which acquisition worth Rs 2.20 lakh crore (98 per cent) will be sourced from domestic industries

97 more Tejas Mark 1A fighter jets to be procured at a cost of Rs 66,000 crore, 155 light combat helicopters at a cost of Rs 54,000 crore

The DAC, chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, accorded the Acceptance of Necessity (AoN) for the purpose. An AoN is the first step in the acquisition process of the MoD and is like a green light to the forces to frame tenders for procurement. In all, the DAC okayed proposals worth Rs 2.23 lakh crore, of which acquisition worth Rs 2.20 lakh crore (98 per cent) will be sourced from domestic industries.

The DAC okayed 97 more Tejas Mark 1A fighter jets at a cost of Rs 66,000 crore. These will be in addition to the 83 such jets already ordered. The first one is slated for delivery in February 2024. Public sector undertaking Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) is making the jets.

The DAC also okayed an additional 155 light combat helicopters (LCHs) at a cost of Rs 54,000 crore. Ninety of these copters are for the Army aviation and 65 for the IAF. Both services have inducted a small number of these copters that can carry missiles. Adding to the air power, the DAC accorded the AoN for the upgrade of Su-30 MKI aircraft by HAL.

Another proposal cleared was that of 400 towed artillery guns at a cost of Rs 10,000 crore. This is the second such towed artillery gun project after the DAC okayed 307 such guns in March. "These guns will enhance the lethality and safety of projectiles," the MoD said.

The DAC has accorded the AoN for the procurement of anti-tank munition capable of neutralising tanks and armoured personnel carriers. The AoN has also been granted for the procurement and upgrade of T-90 tank gadgetry, and for the procurement of anti-ship missiles for the surface platform of the Navy.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 10-12-2023

Army shortlists 22 equipment for surveillance, information collation

Ajay Banerjee

New Delhi, The Army has shortlisted 22 military equipment that will provide cutting-edge technology in

warfare, surveillance and information collation. These will also be used for satellite imagery analysis, which will make it possible to automatically identify military infrastructure.

The items have been designed and produced in-house under the Army Design Bureau. Army Chief Gen Manoj Pande reviewed the 22 equipment that were put on display at an event on December 5.

The artificial intelligence-based satellite imagery analysis software has been named military objects detection system. It allows automatic detection and classification of military objects in satellite imagery in real time, said sources.

Using this, commanders at all levels can take timely decision by having real-time situational awareness. Another use of AI has been made for developing information collation and analysis software. This cuts down on labour-intensive and time-consuming manual approach for gathering and analysing intelligence data and enemy activities.

The software automates data extraction, enabling real time analysis by quickly extracting critical insights from raw inputs to enhance situational awareness and decision-making ability. The software compiles and condenses incoming enemy activity data, presenting it in format that allows rapid reaction. It offers dynamic graphical representation, generating informative graphs that unveil concealed trends. It can be used with geographic information system software employed by the military to facilitate data mapping and enabling generation of heatmaps and simultaneous visualisation of multiple activities.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 8-12-2023

India successfully conducts training launch of short-range ballistic missile Agni-1

The missile was successfully test-fired last time on June 1 from the same base

PTI, Balasore (Odisha)

India on Thursday successfully conducted the training launch of short-range ballistic missile 'Agni-1 from APJ Abdul Kalam Island, off the Odisha coast, a defence official said.

"Agni-1 is a proven very high precision missile system. The user training launch, carried out under the aegis of the Strategic Forces Command, successfully validated all operational and technical parameters," said the official.

The missile was successfully test-fired last time on June 1 from the same base.

The Agni series of missiles are the mainstay of India's nuclear delivery options.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 5-12-2023
For Navy, small aircraft carriers limit options

Abhijit Singh

Last week, India's Defence Procurement Board, a key defence ministry agency, approved a plan for the Indian Navy (IN) to acquire a second indigenous aircraft carrier. To be built at a cost of over 40,000 crore, the IAC-II will be modelled on INS Vikrant, India's first indigenous aircraft carrier, commissioned in September 2022. The new warship is intended to bolster India's maritime security posture against China's People's Liberation Army Navy, whose expanding incursions into the Indian Ocean region have generated anxiety in New Delhi. Even so, the move raises questions about the advisability of a second "light" 40,000-tonne aircraft carrier for the Indian Navy, instead of a "big" 60,000-tonne plus flattop.

It is instructive that the IN has, at least since 2018, been pushing for a big aircraft carrier. However, last year the Navy unexpectedly dropped its demand for a large carrier and announced that the next flattop would be a small one. What led to this reversal is still unclear, but it seems the IN is in a fiscal situation in which building a large aircraft carrier is no longer feasible.

The current focus of the Modi government is on achieving self-reliance for India, and the Navy is under pressure to prioritise the development of indigenous capabilities. With capital allocations down and the government having significantly reduced the acquisition of foreign systems, the Navy has neither the material resources needed nor an assurance of imports for the development and construction of a big carrier. Choosing a smaller flattop design potentially guarantees that Cochin Shipyard and its considerable expertise gained during the construction of the Vikrant are effectively utilised.

Naval planners seem to have taken another factor into their calculations. The Navy is also looking to induct indigenous twin-engine deck-based fighters by 2030. To operate these aircraft, which are intended to replace the MiG-29Ks, the IN will require at least two operational aircraft carriers. A light aircraft carrier makes better sense because a large flattop could take over two decades to enter service.

Nonetheless, the transition from a supercarrier to a modest flattop creates a predicament for the Navy. The problem with light carriers is that they are unsuitable for use in today's dynamic and contested maritime environment.

In wartime conditions, a small carrier is constrained in its operations, particularly when faced with the adversary's anti-access, anti-denial systems. In the absence of a catapult system to enable the launch of heavy, long-range multi-function aircraft, the ship is forced to operate within the engagement envelope of the

adversary's shore-based missiles and air defence systems.

Small carriers are also less capable than large deck carriers in other critical respects. Small flattops feature conventional propulsion (gas turbine or diesel), which provides less power than large carriers, which are typically nuclear-powered and have enough power to operate constantly in sensitive littorals. This results in reduced flexibility and agility in operations. A light carrier has a shorter operational range, a lower sortie generation rate, and less endurance than a large aircraft carrier, which can act as a floating base and deploy for lengthy periods. Small flattops also have less powerful onboard defence systems than larger carriers and are especially vulnerable to drone swarm attacks.

While small deck carriers are valuable in peacetime presence activities, their combat role is restricted unless their air wing consists of a strong aircraft with improved range, lethality, and survivability. Maritime planners today know the importance of having a fifth-generation carrier-based fighter that can deliver precision munitions over extended distances without endangering aircraft or aircrews. The IN does not have such an aircraft presently. Over the next decade, MiG-29Ks and Rafale marines would likely operate from Indian aircraft carriers. How successful these operations will be in deterring opponents in the far seas is hard to say.

There are, admittedly, two views on the subject of light aircraft carriers. Aircraft carrier sceptics believe that the flattop being expensive and vulnerable assets ought to be small and well-protected. With limited defensive capability against modern anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles, the carrier must not venture too close to enemy territory. Aircraft carrier proponents disagree, and point to the ship's decisive ability to tip the psychological balance at sea. A large flattop, they rightly claim, is the only platform capable of maintaining a continuous and visible presence in the far-littorals. That complicated the adversary's cost-benefit calculus in a way that no other asset is capable of doing.

If the sceptics are right and symbolic presence at sea is all that matters, then a light carrier is indeed a worthy asset. But if a carrier is meant for use in combat, then it must be capable of supporting larger numbers of long-range combat and reconnaissance aircraft. Whatever the rhetoric surrounding IAC-II in the media, China — with large aircraft carriers, such as the 65,000-tonne Shandong and the 80,000-tonne still-to-be-commissioned Fujian — is unlikely to be deterred by the presence of two 40,000-tonne Indian flattops in the Indian Ocean.

It is not that India's naval planners are unaware of this reality. Their decision to opt for a smaller carrier seems to be the result of diminishing options. Despite the ship's shortcomings, particularly its limited warfighting capability, a second Vikrant is all they can hope for at the moment. Yet, policymakers ought to know that a

small aircraft carrier won't cut it in combat with a worthy adversary in the littorals.

Abhijit Singh is head of the Maritime Policy Initiative at Observer Research Foundation. The views expressed are personal

GREATER KASHMIR, SRINAGAR 1-12-2023

3 India-made naval ships launched in Kochi

New Delhi, Nov 30: Kochi Shipyard marked a milestone on November 30, as it successfully launched the inaugural trio of vessels under the 08 x...

IANIS

New Delhi: Kochi Shipyard marked a milestone on November 30, as it successfully launched the inaugural trio of vessels under the 08 x ASW Shallow Water Craft (CSL) initiative for the Indian Navy.

These vessels, named Mahe, Malvan, and Mangrol, are part of a strategic project undertaken by CSL to bolster India's naval capabilities. The launch ceremony, held at Kochi, saw the three ships taking to the water with the blessings invoked from Atharva Veda.

The Mahe class ASW Shallow Water Crafts derive their nomenclature from key ports strategically situated along the Indian coastline. These vessels aim to uphold the illustrious heritage of their predecessors, the erstwhile minesweepers sharing the same names.

The contractual agreement for constructing eight ASW SWC ships was formalized between the Ministry of Defence and Cochin Shipyard Limited on April 30, 2019. The Mahe class ships are designed to incorporate cutting-edge, domestically developed underwater sensors. These ships are designed to incorporate over 80% indigenous content.

Their primary missions encompass anti-submarine operations in coastal waters, Low Intensity Maritime Operations (LIMO), and Mine Laying Operations. Characterized by a length of 78 meters and a displacement of approximately 900 tons, the ASW SWC ships boast a maximum speed of 25 knots. The maiden vessel from this project is scheduled for delivery in 2024.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 8-12-2023

Nigeria, Philippines, Argentina showing interest in procuring Tejas jets:

HAL chief

In February 2021, the defence ministry sealed a Rs 48,000 crore deal with the Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd for procurement of 83 Tejas MK-1A jets for the IAF

PTI, New Delhi

Nigeria, Philippines, Argentina and Egypt have shown interest in procuring indigenously-developed Tejas Light Combat aircraft, CB Ananthakrishnan, the

Chairman and Managing Director of the Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd, said on Wednesday.

Ananthakrishnan said talks are on with these countries for the possible procurement.

"Nigeria, Philippines and Egypt are keen to procure Tejas Light Combat aircraft," Ananthakrishnan told PTI on the sidelines of an event.

On how India will proceed with the supply of the Tejas jets to Argentina if the procurement fructifies as the aircraft has some components sourced from the United Kingdom, the Chairman and Managing Director of Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) said a way would be found out in such a scenario.

After the 1982 Falklands War, the UK imposed an embargo on military sales to Argentina and especially prevented supply of hardware manufactured by it.

In view of the British restrictions, it is perceived that supply of military hardware comprising components sourced from the UK may not be easy for India.

In July, the Argentine defence minister visited India with a focus on enhancing defence industrial partnership.

The HAL had inked an agreement with the Argentinian Air Force to provide spares and services its two-tonne class helicopters.

The defence ties between India and the Philippines have been on an upswing in the last few years.

In January, the Philippines concluded a USD 375 million deal with India for the procurement of three batteries of the BrahMos cruise missile.

The Tejas is a single-engine multi-role fighter aircraft capable of operating in high-threat air environments.

It has been designed to undertake the air defence, maritime reconnaissance and strike roles.

Tejas aircraft are set to be the mainstay of the Indian Air Force (IAF). It has already inducted nearly 40 Tejas of initial variants.

In February 2021, the defence ministry sealed a Rs 48,000 crore deal with the Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd for procurement of 83 Tejas MK-1A jets for the IAF.

Last month, the ministry accorded an initial approval to procure an additional batch of 97 Tejas jets for the IAF.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 3-12-2023

Solar wind particle experiment payload onboard Aditya-L1 starts operations: ISRO

Aditya-L1 is the first Indian space-based observatory to study the Sun from a halo orbit around first Sun-earth Lagrangian point (L1), which is located roughly 1.5 million km from Earth

PTI, Bengaluru

The Aditya Solar wind Particle Experiment payload onboard India's Aditya-L1 satellite has commenced its operations and is performing normally, ISRO said on Saturday.

ISRO's Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV-C57) on September 2 had successfully launched the Aditya-L1 spacecraft, from the second launch pad of Satish Dhawan Space Centre, Sriharikota.

Aditya-L1 is the first Indian space-based observatory to study the Sun from a halo orbit around first Sun-earth Lagrangian point (L1), which is located roughly 1.5 million km from Earth.

In a statement, ISRO said Aditya Solar wind Particle Experiment (ASPEX) comprises two cutting-edge instruments 'the Solar Wind Ion Spectrometer (SWIS) and SupraThermal and Energetic Particle Spectrometer (STEPS). The STEPS instrument was operational on September 10, 2023. The SWIS instrument was activated on November 2, 2023, and has exhibited optimal performance.

"SWIS, utilising two sensor units with a remarkable 360° field of view each, operates in planes perpendicular to one another," the statement read.

According to ISRO, the instrument has successfully measured solar wind ions, primarily protons and alpha particles.

A sample energy histogram acquired from one of the sensors over two days in November 2023 illustrates variations in proton and alpha particle (doubly ionized helium, He2+) counts, the agency said.

"These variations were recorded with nominal integration time, providing a comprehensive snapshot of solar wind behaviour," ISRO said.

The directional capabilities of SWIS enable precise measurements of solar wind protons and alphas, contributing significantly to addressing longstanding questions about solar wind properties, underlying processes, and their impact on Earth, the space agency explained.

"The change in the proton and alpha particle number ratio, as observed by SWIS, holds the potential to provide indirect information about the arrival of Coronal Mass Ejections (CMEs) at the Sun-Earth Lagrange Point L1," ISRO said.

Enhanced alpha-to-proton ratio is often regarded as one of the sensitive markers of the passage of interplanetary coronal mass ejections (ICMEs) at the L1 and hence considered crucial for space weather studies.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 3-12-2023

Aditya-L1 mission: ISRO activates second instrument on solar spacecraft **Shobhit Gupta**

According to ISRO, ASPEX comprises two instruments, 'the Solar Wind Ion Spectrometer (SWIS) and SupraThermal and Energetic Particle Spectrometer (STEPS).

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) on Saturday said Aditya Solar Wind Particle Experiment (ASPEX) payload onboard India's first solar satellite

Aditya-L1, has commenced its operations and started working normally.

Sharing the post on X, the Indian space agency said, "The Solar Wind Ion Spectrometer (SWIS), the second instrument in the Aditya Solar wind Particle Experiment (ASPEX) payload is operational."

According to the space agency, ASPEX comprises two instruments – the Solar Wind Ion Spectrometer (SWIS) and SupraThermal and Energetic Particle Spectrometer (STEPS). While the STEPS instrument started operating on September 10 while, the SWIS instrument was activated on November 2, 2023.

"SWIS, utilising two sensor units with a 360-degree field of view each, operates in planes perpendicular to one another. The instrument has successfully measured solar wind ions, primarily protons and alpha particles", ISRO said in a statement.

The ISRO also shared a graph depicting the energy variations in proton (H+) and alpha particle (doubly ionized helium, He2) counts captured by SWIS over the past two days.

The variations were recorded with nominal integration time, providing a comprehensive snapshot of solar wind behaviour.

The space agency further said that the SWIS' directional capabilities allow for accurate measurements of solar wind alphas and protons, which significantly aids in answering long-standing concerns regarding the characteristics of the solar wind, its underlying processes, and its effects on Earth.

"The change in the proton and alpha particle number ratio, as observed by SWIS, holds the potential to provide indirect information about the arrival of Coronal Mass Ejections (CMEs) at the Sun-Earth Lagrange Point L1," ISRO further said.

The enhanced alpha-to-proton ratio is considered important because it is regarded as one of the most sensitive indicators of the passage of interplanetary coronal mass ejections (ICMEs) at the L1 and thus, considered crucial for space weather studies.

Aditya-L1, India's first solar mission, was launched September 2 from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SDSC) in Andhra Pradesh's Sriharikota. The mission aims to study the Sun from a halo orbit around first Sun-earth Lagrangian point (L1), which is located roughly 1.5 million km from Earth.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 6-12-2023

ISRO moves Chandrayaan-3 module to orbit around earth

PTI

Bengaluru, Propulsion Module of Chandrayaan-3 has been moved from an orbit around the moon to an orbit around the earth, ISRO has said, terming the operation a unique experiment.

The primary objective of the Chandrayaan-3 mission was to demonstrate a soft landing near the lunar south

polar region and perform experiments using the instruments on the 'Vikram' lander and the 'Pragyan' rover. For Propulsion Module, the main objective was to ferry the lander module from the Geostationary Transfer Orbit to the final lunar polar circular orbit.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 5-12-2023

Army gets unmanned combat aerial vehicles

Staff Correspondent

In a first, the aviation unit of Bangladesh Army got unmanned combat aerial vehicles, also known as combat drone, said a press release of Inter-Services Public Relations yesterday.

A programme was held on the occasion at the aviation forward base in Patenga, Chattogram. Chief of Army Staff General SM Shafiuddin Ahmed joined the programme as the chief guest.

These drones will make it possible to take instant decisions and observe any ongoing operations, said the press release.

Besides, the incorporation of unmanned combat aerial vehicle will enhance the army's operations as well as help maintain the sovereignty of the country, it added.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 15-12-2023

Reasons for Bangladesh to have a Strong Navy

Rajeev Ahmed

Bangladesh is a country with a long coastline and a vast maritime territory in the Bay of Bengal, one of the most strategic and dynamic regions in the world. The Bay of Bengal is home to more than 400 million people and accounts for about 25% of global trade. It is also rich in natural resources, such as fish, oil, gas, minerals, and marine biodiversity. Moreover, the Bay of Bengal is a key arena for the emerging Indo-Pacific geoeconomics, where major powers like China, India, Japan, and the US are competing for influence and access.

Given these opportunities and challenges, Bangladesh needs to build an advanced navy in the Bay of Bengal to protect its national interests and enhance its regional role.

Bangladesh has an immense potential to harness the blue economy by developing its maritime sectors, such as fisheries, aquaculture, tourism, shipping, port services, offshore energy and seabed mining. However, these sectors require a strong naval presence to ensure security, sovereignty, and sustainability. Bangladesh also needs to defend its maritime boundaries and rights against any encroachment or dispute from its neighbours, especially Myanmar and India. The country has established several MPAs in the Bay of Bengal, such as the Swatch-of-No-Ground Marine Protected Area, the NijhumDwip National Park, and the St Martins Island Marine Park. These MPAs are home to

rich and diverse marine life, such as dolphins, whales, turtles, corals, and mangroves. A strong navy can monitor and enforce the conservation and management of these MPAs and prevent any damage or destruction to the marine ecosystem by human activities.

Bangladesh is prone to environmental disasters, such as tropical cyclones, sea level rise, coastal erosion, salinity intrusion, cyclones, floods and droughts. These impacts pose serious threats to the lives and livelihoods of millions of people living in the coastal areas. A well-equipped navy can lead country's climate crisis mitigation effort by providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), conducting search and rescue operations, supporting coastal management and adaptation, and monitoring environmental changes.

Besides, the country faces various security challenges in the maritime domain, such as smuggling, human trafficking, maritime terrorism, illegal fishing, and naval rivalry. A robust navy will be more capable to deter and counter these threats by enhancing maritime domain awareness (MDA), conducting patrols and surveillance, enforcing laws and regulations, cooperating with other navies and agencies, and projecting power and influence. Bangladesh also needs to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity against any external aggression or interference, especially considering the Rohingya influx from Myanmar that has created a humanitarian crisis and a security dilemma for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is situated at the crossroads of South Asia and Southeast Asia, two regions that are vital for the Indo-Pacific geoeconomics. Bangladesh can leverage its strategic location to become a bridge between these regions and a hub for trade, investment, connectivity and cooperation. A sophisticated navy can help Bangladesh achieve this vision by facilitating maritime commerce and connectivity, participating in regional initiatives and forums, engaging in naval diplomacy and confidence-building measures (CBMs), and balancing the interests and influences of major powers. Bangladesh is an active member of various regional organizations and initiatives related to the Bay of Bengal, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). A strong navy can boost Bangladesh's role and contribution to these platforms and promote regional cooperation and integration on various issues of common interest.

To realize these objectives, Bangladesh already has embarked on an ambitious plan to modernize its navy under the "Force Goal 2030" that envisages transforming it into a three-dimensional force capable of operating above and under water. The plan includes acquiring new platforms and systems, such as submarines, frigates, corvettes, patrol vessels,

helicopters, drones, radars and missiles. The plan also involves developing new infrastructure and facilities, such as bases, docks, shipyards, and training centres. Moreover, the plan entails enhancing human resources and capabilities by recruiting more personnel, improving training and education standards.

Bangladesh Navy has already made significant progress in implementing this plan. It has acquired two submarines from China in 2016-2017 that have enhanced its underwater warfare capabilities. It has also commissioned several new surface combatants from China and South Korea that have improved its surface warfare capabilities. Bangladesh Navy also has started to build its own ships in local shipyards. Bangladesh Navy has engaged in a variety of bilateral and multilateral drills with other naval forces, including the annual Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) with the Indian Navy, and the Cooperation Afloat Readiness And Training (CARAT) exercises with the US Navy. These activities have enhanced its ability to work together with other navies and have elevated its level of professionalism. The navy also has established new commands and units such as the Special Warfare Diving and Salvage (SWADS) unit that have expanded its special operations capabilities.

But there is still much more to be done. Bangladesh needs to invest more in its naval infrastructure, manpower, technology, and naval doctrine. It needs to develop an unobstructed vision and strategy for its maritime role and ambitions. It needs to balance its relations with different powers and partners in the region. And it needs to cooperate with other countries on common issues and challenges. In addition, the government should take steps to alleviate the common peoples apprehension about venturing into the sea. Given that people prefer to reside on land, it is crucial to raise awareness about the untapped opportunities that lie within the vast expanse of the ocean.

We must remember that a strong navy can help Bangladesh to:

- Enhance its trade and maritime connectivity with other countries in the region and beyond.
 - Explore and exploit its ocean resources in a sustainable and equitable manner.
 - Mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change and environmental disasters.
 - Ensure its security and stability against external threats and challenges.
 - Uphold its international obligations and commitments on human rights and humanitarian issues.
- Bangladesh has a golden opportunity to become a maritime leader in the Bay of Bengal. But it also has a great responsibility to use its naval power wisely and responsibly. The future of Bangladesh depends on how well it can navigate the turbulent waters of the bay.

The writer is a Geopolitical Analyst, Strategic Thinker and Editor at geopolitics.com

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 7-12-2023

SLAF gets two Harbin Y-12 IV aircraft

Sri Lanka Air Force marked a significant chapter in the history with the ceremonial induction of two Harbin Y-12 IV aircraft at SLAF Base Ratmalana held on Tuesday (5). The ceremony was attended by State Defence Minister Premitha Bandara Tennakoon and Chinese Ambassador Qi Zhenhong.

The No. 8 Tactical Transport Squadron, renowned as 'The Cradle of Transport Pilots,' laid the foundation for this historic occasion on April 2, 1996. Originally equipped with eight Y-12 II aircraft (SCL 851 to SCL 859) inducted in 1987, these aircraft played a pivotal role in various air operations during the local theatre of war.

The proceedings commenced with the signing of documents symbolizing the transfer of the Harbin Y-12 aircraft to the Sri Lanka Air Force. Commander of the Air Force, Air Marshal Udeni Rajapaksa and Den Ling from China National Aero Technology Import and Export Corporation presided over this key moment, marking the official handover.

The Air Force Commander expressed gratitude for the strategic partnership and elaborating the significance of the new additions to the Sri Lanka Air Force's fleet. He emphasized the continued commitment to strengthening international collaborations, highlighting the value of the Harbin Y-12 IV aircraft in enhancing the Air Force's operational capabilities. A memento was presented to the Chief Guest, State Defence Minister to commemorate the historical milestone. Air Marshal Udeni Rajapaksa extended his gratitude to the State Minister, acknowledging the untiring support in advancing the capabilities of the Sri Lanka Air Force.

The Chief Guest reiterated the Government's commitment, guided by the Chief of the Armed Forces and President Ranil Wickremesinghe, to ensuring regional security and stability.

Senior Advisor to the President on National Security and Chief of Presidential Staff, Sagala Ratnayaka, Secretary to the Ministry of Defence, General Kamal Gunaratne (Retd), Chief of Defence Staff, General Shavendra Silva, Commander of the Navy, Vice Admiral Priyantha Perera and senior SLAF officers were present.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 7-12-2023

Navy takes hold of four poaching trawlers

The Sri Lanka Navy conducted special operations to chase away Indian poaching trawlers from Sri Lankan waters in the evening of 06th December 2023. The separate operations led to the seizure of 04 Indian trawlers with 21 Indian fishermen poaching in Sri Lankan waters off Mannar and off Kovilan, Kankasanthurei.

The Navy continues to conduct regular patrols and operations in Sri Lankan waters to curb illegal fishing practices by foreign fishing trawlers, taking into account the consequences of these practices on the livelihood of local fishermen and marine resources of the country.

In similar efforts, the North Central Naval Command and Northern Naval Command deployed their Fast Attack Craft and Inshore Patrol Craft to chase away a cluster of Indian poaching trawlers, after having spotted they were engaging in illegal fishing in Sri Lankan waters on the evening of 06th December. In these operations, the North Central Naval Command held 01 Indian poaching trawler that continued to remain in island waters off Mannar, with 08 Indian fishers aboard. In the same vein, the Northern Naval Command apprehended 03 Indian poaching trawlers with 13 Indian fishermen who were poaching off Kovilan, Kankasanthurai.

The apprehended Indian fishermen (21) and the poaching trawlers (04) were brought to the Talaimannar Pier and Kankasanthurai harbour and they will be handed over to the Talaimannar and Jaffna Fisheries Inspectors for onward legal action.

Including the poaching trawlers held in this operation, the Sri Lanka Navy has seized 31 Indian poaching trawlers and apprehended 195 Indian fishermen thus far in 2023. Following these apprehensions, the poaching trawlers and fishermen have been handed over to relevant authorities for legal action.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 9-12-2023

Sri Lanka Navy celebrates 73rd

Anniversary

In view of the 73rd Anniversary of the Navy also took a center stage. Accordingly, the symbolic Kanchuka Puja and Flag Blessing ceremonies were held at the Ruwanwelisaya and Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradhapura on 16th and 17th November. Similarly, the Joint Christian Commemoration & Thanksgiving Service was held at All Saints' Church – Borella on 21st November.

In addition, an All-night Pirith Chanting and Alms Giving ceremonies were held at the Welisara Naval Complex on 24th and 25th November. The special Puja of Hindu tradition was held at Sri Ponnambalawaneswarar Kovil, Colombo on 01st December and the special Islamic prayer session was held at the Jumma Mosque, Chatham Street on 02nd December. During these multi-religious spiritual events, merits were transferred on fallen naval war veterans and blessings were invoked on disabled naval war heroes, naval personnel both serving and retired, their family members and the Navy for its anniversary.

Meanwhile, a 'Gilanpasa' offering was held at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy on 08th December. On 09th December, 'Buddha Puja' to the Sacred Tooth Relic and alms for the members of Maha

Sangha have also been arranged at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic. Further, an Aloka Puja, arranged by the Naval Buddhist Association, will be held at Sandahiru Seya on 09th December.

Coinciding with the anniversary celebrations, the Navy has also organized blood donation campaigns in Northern, Eastern, and North Central Naval Commands. Incidentally, a large group of naval personnel generously contributed to the noble cause of saving lives through blood donation.

Under the rightful guidance of the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces and President, Hon. Ranil Wickremesinghe and the Ministry of Defence, the Sri Lanka Navy, led by Commander of the Navy Vice Admiral Priyantha Perera, remains vigilant and fully prepared to overcome any maritime challenge. In line with this commitment, the Navy has bolstered its fleet with resilient sea units and ensured the proficient training of its personnel to carry out their roles with diligence. Furthermore, the Navy is resolute in fulfilling its military, diplomatic, and constabulary duties, prioritizing the nation's best interests at all costs.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 5-12-2023

Army Commander Welcomed in India

& Meets India's Chief of the Army Staff

The Indian Army HQ in New Delhi laid a red carpet welcome to the Commander of the Army, Lieutenant General Vikum Liyanage RWP RSP ndu when he arrived there on the invitation of the Chief of the Army Staff of the Indian Army, General Manoj Pande PVSM AVSM VSM ADC on Monday (4 December).

The visiting Sri Lankan Army Chief after the warm welcome extended to him at first was ushered to lay a floral wreath at the National War Heroes' Memorial. Afterwards, troops of the Indian Army presented a Guard of Honour salute to the visiting Commander of the Army, Lieutenant General Vikum Liyanage in a formal parade.

Next, the Commander of the Army commenced formal discussions with his Indian counterpart, Chief of the Army Staff of the Indian Army, General Manoj Pande PVSM AVSM VSM ADC at the office in the Indian Army HQ.

During official discussions, matters related to bilateral defence cooperation, enhancement of training modules, mutual understanding and friendship between the two armies were taken up for review. At the conclusion of the discussion, both parties exchanged mementos as tokens of appreciation and goodwill.

The primary objective of the official visit is meant to further enhance existing bonds of mutual understanding and friendship between the two armies and nations. Additionally, it also aims to intensify bilateral defence engagements and explore new opportunities for defence cooperation.

Lieutenant General Vikum Liyanage, Commander of the Army along with his spouse, Mrs Janaki Liyanage, President, Army Seva Vanitha Unit and the Military Secretary, Major General S.W.M Fernando WWV RWP RSP VSV USP ndc psc has undertaken this visit to India following the invitation, extended.

Simultaneously, Mrs. Janaki Liyanage, President, Army Seva Vanitha Unit participated in separate official programmes with the President of the Indian Army Wives' Welfare Association and members of the Central Army Wives' Welfare Association.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 2-12-2023

Iran, Saudi Arabia discuss military cooperation

TEHRAN- High ranking military officials from Saudi Arabia and Iran deliberated on proposals to strengthen military ties between the two Muslim nations.

Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman Al Saud and Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri discussed a number of topics over the phone on Thursday.

The Iranian Armed Forces are prepared to strengthen their military ties with Saudi Arabia, according to General Bagheri.

In addition, he praised Riyadh for convening an extraordinary session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) recently to discuss the Gaza issue and the strengthening of amicable ties between Tehran and Riyadh.

The Saudi minister of defense, for his part, praised the efforts to strengthen military ties between the two countries.

The two parties also spoke about the urgent problems facing the Muslim world.

On November 01, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi arrived in the Saudi capital for a summit of Muslim and Arab leaders on the Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip.

This was the first visit by an Iranian president to Saudi Arabia since the resumption of diplomatic relations between Tehran and Riyadh under a Chinese-brokered agreement last March.

Also, Raisi's trip to Saudi Arabia was the first visit by an Iranian president to Saudi Arabia in 11 years.

President Raisi spoke to reporters before leaving Tehran for Riyadh, saying the OIC summit should have not been a platform for declaring positions but instead, it should have resulted in actions on Gaza.

Raisi called the holding of an emergency meeting of the OIC and reaching a fully operational and executive decision about Gaza the expectation of all the people of the world, especially the Islamic Ummah, according to the official website of the Iranian presidency.

"This platform is not one for mere speech and announcement of positions, but must be a platform for action to quickly stop the bombings, lift the blockade of

Gaza, and open the way to help the oppressed and authoritative people of this region, as well as to achieve the rights of the Palestinians, which was basically the main philosophy of the establishment of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation," he said.

President Raisi stated that the main purpose of his trip to Saudi Arabia was to participate in the emergency meeting of the OIC on the Palestinian issue.

Referring to the efforts of the Islamic Republic of Iran to hold this meeting immediately since the beginning of the Zionist regime's invasion of Gaza, he said, "The issue of Palestine is the main issue of the Islamic Ummah and the Muslims of the world, but it is also the issue of humanity and all the people of understanding and thinking all over the world who have taken to the streets in millions these days and they shout about the oppression of the Zionist regime and the support of the Americans for this genocide."

President Raisi stated that the crimes committed by the Zionist regime in Gaza today are a clear example of war crimes and crimes against humanity, adding, "The Americans claim in their statements and messages that they are not looking to expand the domain of the war, while this claim is not compatible with their actions at all, because the fuel of the Zionist war machine is provided by the Americans."

He described the U.S. efforts to obstruct a ceasefire in Gaza at various meetings including at the UN Security Council as examples of the Americans lying about recent events. "Today the world should see the main face of the Americans, to see how, as stated by the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, they are the main supporter of crimes against the oppressed nations with good appearance and velvet hands," he continued.

Iran and Saudi Arabia reached an agreement on March 10 to reestablish diplomatic ties and reopen embassies and missions following seven years of estrangement, following protracted discussions mediated by China.

The two regional powerhouses have emphasized the need of respecting one another's national sovereignty and abstaining from meddling in one another's domestic affairs.

Rear Admiral Shahram Irani, the commander of the Iranian Navy, revealed intentions in June for several regional nations, notably Saudi Arabia and Iran, to join a new naval coalition in the northern Indian Ocean.

Later, in August, representatives from the two governments' defense ministries came to an agreement to swap military attachés.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 6-12-2023

PN inducts 5th ATR aircraft to carry out reconnaissance at sea

By Muhammad Anis

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Navy (PN) on Tuesday inducted 5th ATR aircraft which was held at Naval Aviation Base PNS Mehran, Karachi.

Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Naveed Ashraf graced the occasion as chief guest. The newly inducted ATR aircraft, acquired from PIA, is equipped with day and night flying capability to undertake ferry, logistics support, Medical Evacuation (MEDEVAC), General Evacuation (GENEVAC) and training missions, the spokesman of Pakistan Navy said.

Pakistan Navy is in the process of acquiring ATR aircrafts from various sources and is modernising them to carry out maritime reconnaissance and antisubmarine warfare missions at sea. Being a commercial aircraft it has very low operating cost as compared to tailor made military aircraft.

This is the 5th aircraft which has been acquired for the purpose. Speaking on the occasion, Chief of the Naval Staff highlighted the importance of evolving geo-strategic environment in the Indian Ocean Region and emphasized the need to have a potent naval force in order to counter emerging challenges.

He underlined the significance of strong maritime defence for Pakistan and reiterated that induction of modern aircraft will enhance Pakistan Navy's capability of safeguarding our maritime frontiers.

Earlier during his welcome address, Commander Pakistan Fleet Vice Admiral Muhammad Faisal Abbasi highlighted that induction of ATR will ensure sustained operations from western seaboard through regular logistics and personnel movements.

Later, Chief of the Naval Staff handed over ATR documents to Commander Pakistan Fleet. The ceremony was attended by flag officers, ex aviators of Pakistan Navy and reps of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA).

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 14-12-2023

US defence secretary hosts army chief

Anwar Iqbal

WASHINGTON: Chief of Army Staff Gen Asim Munir commenced his first working day in Washington on Wednesday with a meeting with the US defence secretary at the Pentagon.

The Pentagon issued a brief statement after the meeting, saying: "Secretary of Defence Lloyd J. Austin III hosted Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir at the Pentagon today, where the two officials discussed recent regional security developments and potential areas for bilateral defence cooperation." Gen Munir, who left Islamabad on Sunday, reached the US capital on Tuesday afternoon after spending two days in Britain. Details of his engagements in the UK have not been made public, as it was apparently a private visit. The army chief's visit was also discussed at a Pentagon

briefing on Tuesday, where a journalist reminded press secretary Maj Gen Patrick Ryder that Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin would have his first face-to-face meeting with Pakistan's new army chief and asked what the US defence chief was looking for in this meeting. "Will they be talking about the deportation of Afghans from Pakistan or potentially buying munitions to go to Ukraine?" the journalist asked.

Gen Ryder replied, "I don't have any meetings to read out from the podium. Certainly, as you know, when the secretary meets with foreign counterparts and leaders, we provide a readout. So if we have a readout to put out, we'll certainly do that."

Another journalist asked, "How would you assess US-Pakistan military relations at this point?"

Gen Ryder said, "Pakistan continues to be an important partner in the region. And so obviously, through Centcom, we continue to stay in close contact with them, particularly when it comes to issues like counter-terrorism." Besides the defence secretary, Gen Munir is also expected to meet US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

He may also meet senior members of the US House and the Senate.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 9-12-2023

China, Vietnam coast guards hold high-level working meeting, consolidating traditional friendship and promoting maritime cooperation

By Hu Yuwei and Fan Wei in Guangzhou

The China Coast Guard (CCG) and the Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG) held the 7th high-level work meeting in South China's Guangzhou from December 4 to 8, with both sides vowing to jointly crack down on maritime crimes to further consolidate the traditional friendship between the two countries and deepen practical maritime cooperation.

CCG Director Major General Yu Zhong and VCG Commander Major General Le Quang Dao co-chaired the meeting. The representatives of law enforcement, international cooperation and grass-roots units from both sides attended the event.

The two sides made positive comments on the achievements of cooperation during the year and discussed how to better understand and implement the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two parties and the two countries recently, as well as the relevant instructions and requirements of the two coast guards to strengthen maritime law enforcement cooperation. The two sides decided to establish a

political work exchange mechanism, continue to tap the cooperation potential of joint patrol in the Beibu Gulf, build a young police officers exchange scheme, and jointly crack down on maritime crimes, so as to further consolidate the traditional friendship between the two countries, deepen maritime practical cooperation, properly handle maritime emergencies, and jointly maintain maritime security and stability.

In order to coordinate the meeting and strengthen exchanges and interactions between the vessels, at the invitation of the Chinese side, the Vietnam Coast Guard vessel 8002 visited Guangzhou during the meeting, and the two sides held a series of activities such as a dock welcoming ceremony, cultural and sports exchange, ship boarding visit, ship professional and technical exchange, deck dinner party and so on.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 11-12-2023

Long March rockets mark their 500th spaceflight

By Zhao Lei

China used a Long March 2D carrier rocket on Sunday morning to send several remote-sensing satellites into space, marking the 500th launch of the Long March family.

The rocket blasted off at 9:58 am from the Xichang Satellite Launch Center in southwest China's Sichuan province, spitting red-orange flames and soaring into bright skies, which was caught on video published by the Shanghai Academy of Spaceflight Technology, the maker of the Long March 2D series.

It was China's 59th rocket launch this year and the 13th flight of the Long March 2D model in 2023.

The overall success rate of the Long March fleet is around 97 percent. Of the 500 liftoffs, 297 were carried out by models developed by the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology in Beijing and 203 by the Shanghai Academy of Spaceflight Technology.

Both academies are subsidiaries of the state-owned conglomerate China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp, the nation's dominant space contractor.

The Long March 2D is one of the most reliable rockets in China. Since its debut flight in August 1992, the model has been used in 85 flights, all of which have been successful. This has led to it becoming well-known as the "gold medal rocket model" in China's space industry.

The 40.6-meter-tall rocket has a diameter of 3.35 meters and a liftoff weight of 251 metric tons. Its typical tasks are to transport satellites to low-Earth or sun-synchronous orbits.

The launch vehicle is capable of sending a 1.3-ton spacecraft into a sun-synchronous orbit with an altitude of 700 kilometers, or satellites with a combined weight of 4 tons into a low-Earth orbit.

In June, the 76th flight of the Long March 2D series sent a total of 41 satellites into space, setting a new national record for the largest number of spacecraft launched in a single mission.

China launched its first carrier rocket — a Long March 1 — in April 1970 to send its first satellite, Dongfanghong 1, or East Red 1, into space. The mission made China the fifth country capable of building and launching its own carrier rocket to reach Earth's orbit.

It took the Long March family 37 years to conduct its first 100 launches. The next 100 were made in seven-and-a-half years; the third 100 launches in over four years; the fourth 100 launches in two years and nine months; and the most recent 100 missions in only two years.

China has developed and launched more than 20 types of Long March rockets, and 16 of them are in active service.

Zhang Zhi, a senior rocket designer at the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology, said that engineers are working on the research and development of the country's next-generation crew-carrying rocket, and the new model, named Long March 10, is expected to be ready for its debut flight around 2027.

"The Long March 10 will be a brand new type of launch vehicle, and will be tasked with launching the country's new-generation manned spacecraft and the lunar landing module," he said.

In addition to the Long March family, there are multiple types of Chinese carrier rockets developed by another state-owned space contractor, China Aerospace Science and Industry Corp, and several private enterprises. So far, Chinese carrier rockets have conducted 564 launches.

The payloads in Sunday's mission — several satellites in the Yaogan 39 series — were manufactured by the Shanghai academy and the China Academy of Space Technology in Beijing, which is also part of China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp.

Remote-sensing satellites refer to those tasked with observing, surveying and measuring objects on land or at sea as well as monitoring weather.

China has so far sent more than 300 civilian remote-sensing satellites into orbit. The Yaogan family is the largest fleet of remote-sensing spacecraft in the country, and their data has been widely used by governments, public service sectors and businesses.