

South Asia Centre
Minutes of the Meeting
January 28, 2014

Members Present

Prof. S.D. Muni, Dr. Ashok K. Behuria, Dr. Priyanka Singh, Dr. Anand Kumar, Dr. Yaqoob ul Hassan, Ms. Gulbin Sultana, Mr. Shreyas Deshmukh and Mr. Abhimanyu Singh.

Topic of Discussion

- Dr. Smruti Pattanaik discussed the concept note of her forthcoming fellow paper on ‘*Culture as a Factor in India’s Neighbourhood Policy: Can the States Play a Role?*’

Sri Lanka

- Delegates from the fishermen community of both India and Sri Lanka met in Chennai on January 27, 2014. According to media reports, they were satisfied with the talks. They reached an agreement over various issues related to fishing in Palk Straits, which would be sent to the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and the two governments for approval before implementation. The main contentious issue during the discussion was use of high-powered trawlers by the Indian fishermen in Palk Straits. The Sri Lankan side complained that it had been strictly implementing the ban on trawling since 2010 and over 250 mechanised boats built by Sri Lankan fishermen with crores of rupees were not allowed to operate. But Indian fishermen continue to use them with impunity. They made it clear that they had no problem with Indian fishermen using gill nets. The representatives of Indian fishermen agreed to abstain from using trawling nets called both *purse seine nets* and *erattai madi valai* while fishing in Palk Straits. The two sides agreed to have another round of talks in Colombo after a month. Till that time, Sri Lankan representatives urged Tamil fishermen not to enter Sri Lankan waters as they needed to convince their fishermen about the terms of the agreement.
- Ahead of the March session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Lankan Presidential Secretary Lalith Weeratunga, who is in charge of the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Recommendations by the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), left for the United States on January 22 to brief the leaders of that country on the developments in Sri Lanka. Making a presentation to foreign diplomats in Geneva Weeratunge contradicted President Mahinda Rajapaksa on the number of troops deployed in the Northern Province. On Sunday, January 19, Rajapaksa while opening a hospital constructed with private sector donations claimed that the army personnel in the entire Northern Province came down to 12000 from 70000 at the end of the conflict. On the other hand, Weeratunga in his presentation said that there were 80,000 Army personnel in the North as of October 2013. According to him there has been a reduction of 30 percent of Army troops from the peak deployment of roughly 120,000 in December 2009.
- The Human Rights Commission (HRC) of Sri Lanka has said that it had received 7,752 complaints on alleged violations during January-December of 2013. According to the Human Rights Watch, Sri Lanka made little progress in 2013 on accountability

front in cases involving serious human rights abuses committed during the civil war that ended in 2009. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) also in its quarterly human rights report for the last quarter of 2013 stated that the human rights situation in Sri Lanka had not improved in the last three months despite the intensified international focus on the country's human rights issues.

- Vietnam however has assured Sri Lanka that it would do its "utmost" to support the island nation at the UNHRC where Sri Lanka would be challenged on the human rights and accountability issues in March. Vietnam, which is a member of the UNHRC during 2014-2016, has given this assurance when Sri Lankan President Rajapaksa's special envoy and the General Secretary of Communist Party Minister D.E.W Gunasekera met Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang and Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong on January 23 during his working visit to Viet Nam.
- Sri Lanka assumed the chairmanship of the Vienna Chapter of the Group of 77 (G-77) on January 22, 2014. Ambassador Aliyar Lebbe Abdul Azeez, the Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka, officially took over the chairmanship of the G-77 Vienna Chapter.
- Shiranthi Wickramasinghe Rajapaksa, the First Lady of the Sri-Lanka, went to Uganda to lay the foundation stone and unveil the plan for the construction of a vocational training institute at UWESO's Masuliita Children's Home, a gift from the Sri-Lankan government to help uplift the lives of vulnerable children in Uganda. It is noteworthy to mention here that according to the External Resource Department of Government of Sri Lanka, its development assistance programme in Uganda, Maldives and Somalia have graduated it to the level of a lending country.
- The United States Embassy in Colombo, through its development arm, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), announced a new program to revive the fishery community in the Maradankerny Division of Jaffna. This initiative is part of a significant USAID livelihoods project worth US\$1.5 million that focuses on empowering economic opportunities and accelerating permanent resettlement for many displaced families in the North.
- Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott arrived in Sri Lanka on January 24 on a transit visit and was received by Prime Minister D.M. Jayaratne at the Katunayake Bandaranaike International Airport.
- President Mahinda Rajapaksa made one-day visit to Abu Dhabi.

Bangladesh

- Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) accused the government of unleashing state terrorism in the name of joint operation. Allegedly the joint forces in Satkhira picked up BNP's student wing Jatiyabadi Chhatra Dal's Tala upazila unit vice-president, but did not produce him before court. The very next day he was shot dead by the joint forces barely a kilometre from the Tala police station. BNP claims that similar dramas of crossfire are being staged in killing detained opposition activists across the country. There are also cases of arrest of the BNP leaders without any valid allegations against them. After hearing the writ petitions filed by the accused leaders, High Court has

directed the government not to harass and arrest any BNP leaders without due process of law.

- Due to violent attacks against them, large number of Hindus are migrating to India. National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh has said that Hindus were being targeted by the BNP cadres. However, involvement of Awami League (AL) cadres also cannot be ruled out. The BNP has formed four probe committees to investigate the recent attacks on Hindus, countrywide violence, extrajudicial killing, human rights violation by law enforcers and oppression on 18-party alliance men. BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir formed the committees. Party sources said BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia approved the committees after a meeting with Bangladesh Sammilito Peshajibi Parishad at her Gulshan office on January 22.
- Khaleda Zia addressed a gathering at Suhrawardy Udyan in Dhaka on January 21. This was her first public address since the elections. The gathering was to take place under the banner of the BNP-led 18-party alliance, but the BNP finally held it alone leaving out its key ally Jamaat-e-Islami in the face of strong criticism at home and abroad for its ties with Jamaat, which was involved in recent acts of political violence. BNP policymakers also requested its alliance partners Khelafat Majlish, Islami Oikya Jote and Jamiate Olamaye Islam— all three Islamist parties— not to attend the rally.
- After the elections on January 5, 2014, it was assumed that the country would be hit by violence and instability. The current situation, however, is not as bad as it was thought it would be. Hasina government has ruled out the possibility of conducting fresh elections in the near future. Khaleda Zia seems to be reconciling to the fact that a new government is in power. BNP had to face severe criticism from the international community both for its inflexibility about negotiating with the government over the nature of interim government, its ties with radical Islamist elements, and for its active role in spreading violence in the country. Moreover, at the domestic level it lost the support of the army as well as the business community. Due to violence economy suffered, which made the business community extremely frustrated about the BNP though most of the businessmen have traditionally supported BNP over the years. Therefore, the new government is expected to continue without any disruption provided it starts working on the improvement of governance in the country.
- The new government will fast-track six projects, including the Padma bridge, a deep-sea port and the metro rail, to be implemented at a cost of \$15.5 billion. The other three projects are 1,320-megawatt Rampal Power Plant, 1,000MW Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, and the LNG Terminal Project for importing liquid gas. The decision came at the first meeting of the Fast Track Project Monitoring Committee, chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her office on January 22, 2014. The committee reviewed the implementation status of the six projects.
- Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury has been nominated as the speaker of the Parliament.

Afghanistan

- On January 24, 2014, a suicide bomber attempted to assassinate Mohammad Ismail Khan, the vice presidential candidate for Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, who is also a former

water and energy minister, in western city of Herat in Afghanistan. He was in a car leaving a mosque after Friday prayers in the heart of Herat City when the bomber, said to be in his seventies, detonated his explosives. Local police and the ministry of interior reported no casualties or injuries other than the bomber himself. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attack.

- On January 24, 2014, five volleyball players were gunned down in the eastern province of Laghman by attackers riding on a motorbike. Gunmen shot dead five young Afghan men playing volleyball, but Taleban insurgents responsible for much of Afghanistan's unrest denied any involvement in the killings.
- On January 21, the Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industries (ACCI) reported that Afghanistan's exports witnessed a 49% increase during the first 9 months of the current fiscal year.

Pakistan

- The National Assembly's Standing Committee on Interior and Narcotics Control approved on January 13, 2014, a draft of the Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Ordinance (ATO) 2013, with some members expressing reservations and writing dissenting notes. The committee, however, did not approve of the Protection of Pakistan Ordinance (PPO) 2013 which was termed by some members 'a black law', similar to the overruled Indian law called Protection of Terrorism Act (POTA) 2002.
- On January 19, 2014, the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) put forward an offer for peace talks to the Pakistani government. TTP spokesman Shahidullah Shahid said that the Taliban were ready for meaningful dialogue, however, the government should show its power and sincerity.
- On January 28, 2014, the media of Pakistan reported that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif seemed to have made up his mind to take the battle to the TTP stronghold in North Waziristan Agency (NWA), although the matter was till now being discussed behind closed doors between the government officials and military.
- On January 16, 2014, the Foreign Office of Pakistan stepped in to clear the air about the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project and called a high-level meeting among different ministries in an effort to set policy guidelines. The move comes in the backdrop of the US refusal to give assurances that the pipeline would be exempt from sanctions and subsequent reluctance of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Resources to press ahead with the project.
- A bombing, targeting a security forces convoy, killed 20 people and injured 30 others near Razmak gate in Cantt area of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Bannu district on January 20, 2014. The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.