

SOUTH ASIA TRENDS

December 2014

South Asia Trends is a monthly newsletter on South Asian affairs. The purpose of the newsletter is to provide a panoramic view of important events that shape and impact the politics of the subcontinent. The effort would be to inform our readers of the domestic, regional and international repercussions of the political debates and diplomatic engagements that take place in South Asia.



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Editor's Note

Pakistan witnessed the deadliest terrorist attack ever in December. Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) Pakistan attacked the Army Public School in Peshawar, killing 141 people including 131 children, to take revenge for Pakistan army's continuing Operation Zarb-e-Azb against them. The brutal attack, however, made Government of Pakistan and its armed forces even more resolute to go ahead with the operations. Following the attack, Nawaz Sharif removed the moratorium on death penalty, which was imposed under international pressure (to execute terrorists sentenced with capital punishment). Pakistan has also engaged with Afghan security forces to counter TTP militants who had allegedly fled to Afghanistan and were launching attacks on Pakistan from Afghan soil. However, the release of Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, one of the main accused in the Mumbai attacks case, by the Pakistani judiciary following the attack in Peshawar, puts a question mark on the seriousness of the Pakistan Government's war against terror.

The International Security Assistance Force finally ended its combat mission in Afghanistan. The Afghan National security Forces (ANSF) has now taken over the full responsibility of the security of the country. In this context, the capability of Afghan security forces to take on the Taliban is being debated at large. The NATO foreign ministers' meeting decided to provide "Resolute Support" to Afghan forces from January 2015.

In a move to increase bilateral trade, establishing connectivity and cooperation in power sector between Bhutan and Bangladesh, Prime Minister Tsing Tobgay made his first visit to Bangladesh. Marking its commitment to strengthen the relations with landlocked Bhutan, Bangladesh has offered Bhutan to use its seaports. In return, Bangladesh urged Bhutan to consider it as a partner in its future hydropower projects. Of late, several countries including the USA have shown interest in Bhutan.

Male, the capital city of the Maldives faced a severe water crisis in December when a fire-accident incapacitated Male Water and Sewerage Company, the only provider of water in the city. The crisis was resolved with the assistance provided by India and several other countries including China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Bahrain, Japan and Saudi Arabia.

Several developments took place in the Nepal-China bilateral trade in December as both the countries were preparing to celebrate the 60th year of establishment of their diplomatic relations.

Sri Lanka is all set to conduct the snap Presidential elections in January 2015. Campaigning is going on in full swing. A common opposition front has been formed in a move to defeat Mahinda Rajapaksa in the elections. The common opposition front has nominated Maithripala Sirisena, the General Secretary of the SLFP as their candidate to contest against Mahinda Rajapaksa. Several members from the ruling UPFA has extended support to Maithripala Sirisena. When people are hoping for a positive change in the politics of the country, the election watchdogs in Sri Lanka, PaFFREL, and CaFFE have observed increasing number of pre-election violence propagated by the supporters of the ruling party. According to these election watchdogs, the number of violence and abuse of state power are much higher than the previous Presidential elections. It seems the ruling coalition is getting nervous.

Afghanistan

Ghani, Abdullah head to Europe for NATO, London conference¹

President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah left Kabul for Europe with a delegation on December 1 to participate in NATO's foreign ministers meeting in Brussels and the London Conference on Afghanistan. The delegation accompanying Ghani and Abdullah included head of the Supreme Court Rasheed Rashid, National Security Advisor Hanif Atmar, head of the High Peace Council Salahuddin Rabbani and others. At the NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels, the NATO partner nations in a joint statement welcomed the new chapter of relationship between Afghanistan and NATO beginning from January 1, 2015. The resolute support will be carried out by a small number of NATO troops staying in Afghanistan post 2014 to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah and British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond inaugurated the London Conference on Afghanistan on December 4. Chief Executive Abdullah told the gathering that protecting human rights, particularly women's and children's rights, would be a focus of the new government. Afghan Minister of Finance (MoF), Hazrat Omar Zakhilwal, also spoke to the international dignitaries present at the inaugural meeting.

President Ghani visits Berlin²

Returning from the London Conference on Afghanistan, the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani made a short visit to Berlin. President Ghani commended Germany's support of military and civilian sectors of Afghanistan during the past thirteen years. Germany, which is the third largest supporter of Afghan military after U.S. and UK, is one of the key allies of Afghanistan, President Ghani noted. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel told reporters that Germany would also support Afghanistan in the longer term by training security forces and providing development aid. Germany's promise of continued support came after the country's parliament voted to keep 850 soldiers in Afghanistan after 2014 aimed at training the Afghan forces. It also agreed to provide Kabul with annual development aid of US \$529 million. Currently, 1,500 German soldiers are stationed in Afghanistan. It lost its 55 soldiers since it took part in Afghan war after the end of Taliban regime.

US Defence Secretary visits Kabul³

The outgoing US Defense Secretary, Chuck Hagel, came to Kabul in an unannounced visit on December 6 and met the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) General Commander in Afghanistan General John F. Campbell. At a joint news conference with President Ashraf Ghani, Hagel said the US would retain up to 10,800 troops for the first few months of 2015 before restarting the drawdown, which is scheduled to come down to 5,500 by the end of 2015. During his visit, Hagel also met with Commander of the 201st Corps, Mohammad Zaman Waziri in eastern Nangarhar province to discuss the security situation of the eastern provinces of the country.

ISAF's combat mission comes to end⁴

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Joint Command ceremonially ended its combat mission in Afghanistan on December 8. A ceremony in Kabul,

attended by senior military commanders, marked the end to the 13-year NATO campaign against Taliban insurgents and their allies. ISAF Commander General John F. Campbell told participants of the event that NATO's role would shift to training and supporting the Afghan security forces at the end of 2014. Approved by NATO foreign ministers and representatives of allied nations in Brussels, the new mission would commence from January 1, 2015.

McCain assures Ghani of long-term support⁵

US Senator John McCain held a meeting with Ghani at the Presidential Palace on December 25, where both leaders discussed human rights, security and America's long-term support for Afghanistan. A statement from the Presidential Palace said that President Ghani and Senator McCain reiterated their resolve to bolster bilateral cooperation in combating terrorism and extremism. McCain also held a meeting with Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah. Abdullah appreciated McCain's efforts for having a clear vision in supporting Afghan forces for the last 13 years.

Ghani resumes backdoor talks with Taliban⁶

President Ashraf Ghani has resumed backdoor peace talks with the Taliban and that too under the supervision of the United Nations in an attempt to revive the peace discussions, which collapsed in the last years of former President Hamid Karzai's administration. Reportedly, the backdoor talks with Taliban were aimed at reintegrating the group in the country's political power. The report on resuming peace talks comes as the Afghan capital witnessed 11 attacks in less than 20 days with the Taliban claiming responsibility for most of it. The High Peace Council of Afghanistan (HPC), which was given a large sum of the government's budget to bring the Taliban leaders to the negotiation table, was established in 2010. But many believe that the purpose of this council has not made significant impacts let alone any, instead its former head Burhanuddin Rabbani was killed following his efforts to bring peace into Afghanistan.

350 people lost their lives due to mine blasts in 2014⁷

The Mine Action Coordination Center of Afghanistan (MACCA) has reported that in 2014 alone more than 350 people were killed or disabled as a result of mine blasts. MACCA said more than 80 percent of the victims were children. There are an estimated two million or more disabled Afghans, most of which were victims of violence over the past three decades of war in Afghanistan. They remain one of the most underserved populations in the country.

Wave of brutal attacks threaten humanitarian aid⁸

Following a wave of Taliban attacks on international aid organisations in Kabul, a number of agencies have ordered a temporary evacuation of their foreign employees in order to avoid further casualties. Afghanistan is considered unequivocally the most hostile place in the world to be an aid worker. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) has expressed grave concerns about the deteriorating security conditions, and that important agencies have been forced to leave the country, however temporary, while it remains in dire need of continued humanitarian assistance. According to UNOCHA, of the

total 229 aid workers who have been killed or injured around the world in 2014, 95 of them were in Afghanistan.

Key Pakistani Taliban leader handed over to Islamabad⁹

The second top leader of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Latif Mehsud, who was in the custody of NATO and Afghan security agencies, has been handed over along with three other members of the group to Pakistan's government. But Nazifullah Salarzai, spokesman to President Ashraf Ghani, said Mehsud was not in custody of the Afghan government. But according to Dawn News, Mehsud, a close aide of former leader of TTP, Hakimullah Mehsud, was arrested along with his guards and a tribesman on the Pak-Afghan border by the Afghan National Army (ANA) and were later taken by international troops. Mehsud, who was carrying out the group's attacks in parts of Afghanistan, was considered a keen mastermind of the TTP. But according to some, the Afghan government should reassess their agreements with Pakistan. Former President Hamid Karzai's administration was criticised several times by Afghans for releasing and handing over the Taliban detainees to Pakistan, a country accused of harboring terrorist networks. Some Wolesi Jirga members including a top militant commander criticised the transfer of three terror suspects to Pakistan and sought explanation from Afghan security organs.

Deputy Chief Executive Officer Mohaqiq visits Tehran¹⁰

Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Afghanistan, Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, led a high-ranking delegation, to Tehran on December 6 for a three-day official visit and to attend the World Against Violence and Extremism (WAVE) conference, held on December 9-10. He said that hosting a large number of Afghan immigrants for nearly 30 years by Iran's education system, is admirable, and called for Tehran's assistance to overcome Kabul's educational shortages. The Afghan official also met Iranian Minister of Science, Research and Technology Mohammad Farhadi who said Iran would welcome Afghan elites in its universities and could offer them good services by granting studying opportunities. Iran has built several roads, power transmission lines, border stations and many other infrastructure projects to better link the two nations. Iran has also contributed more than US \$50 million annually to Afghan anti-narcotics efforts during the last five years. Haji Mohaqiq carried a message from President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah calling for extension of residence time of Afghan refugees in Iran. Following the discussions, Iran extended the residence time of some 450,000 Afghan refugees living in Iran for six months.

US closes last detention centre in Afghanistan¹¹

Following the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee report on the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) controversial detention and interrogation program that began after the September 11 attacks in 2001, U.S. forces in Afghanistan on December 11 shut down their last detention centre in the country, located at Bagram Air Base, and transferred their last prisoners over to Afghan custody. President Ashraf Ghani, other Afghan officials and the United Nations (UN) have joined many in the international community by condemning the detention and torture practices

maintained by the CIA, according to the Senate report, from late 2001 through early 2009. The notorious Bagram Prison, a part of the larger military base located in central Bagram province, was just one location inside Afghanistan, and in a broader global network, used by the CIA and its contractors for the detention and interrogation of individuals suspected of having connections to al-Qaeda. The base, along with two Tunisian prisoners, said to be the last of the U.S. detainees in Afghanistan, was handed over to the Afghan government, over half a month before the date. The handover was originally scheduled for - January 1.

Afghanistan's ranking in graft index improves¹²

Afghanistan's ranking in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2014 has improved. The scores of Afghanistan rose by four points as per the index of the Transparency International. Earlier, Afghanistan ranked among first and second corrupt countries.

Bangladesh

President Hamid visits India¹³

President Abdul Hamid along with State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam made a six-day visit to India at the invitation of his Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee. This was the first visit to India in nearly three decades by any incumbent Bangladesh President. The two heads of state met at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on December 19. During the meeting, President Mukherjee told President Hamid that New Delhi attaches the highest importance to relations with Dhaka. President Mukherjee handed over a "historic audio-visual gift" comprising recordings of transmissions made by All India Radio and Doordarshan during the 1971 Liberation War to his visiting Bangladeshi counterpart Abdul Hamid. After the meeting, President Mukherjee hosted a dinner for Hamid which was attended by, among others, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, Bangladesh's State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam and Bangladesh High Commissioner to India Syed Moazzem Ali. During the visit, President Hamid met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Hyderabad House in New Delhi. Without giving any timeframe, Modi told Bangladesh President that his government is working on resolving the pending issues of Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) and Teesta and is hopeful about an early resolution. Prime Minister Modi stressed cooperation in tackling drug trafficking, highlighting three Ds of the menace - darkness, destruction and devastation. During their half-an-hour meeting, he also said that India was willing to supply more electricity to Bangladesh apart from the 500MW being already given through a trans-border power grid. President Hamid thanked India for supplying electricity and sought New Delhi's cooperation to draw power from Bhutan and Nepal. India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj also called on President Hamid at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Swaraj said Bangladesh is not only a neighbour but a dependable friend. She agreed when Hamid said Bangladesh-India Parliamentarians Friendship Group should expand its activities.

Chinese foreign minister visits Bangladesh¹⁴

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a three-day visit to Bangladesh on December 27, at the invitation of his Bangladesh counterpart A.H. Mahmood Ali.

During his visit, Minister Yi met with Prime Minister Hasina and assured her of all kinds of assistance in achieving country's goal to become a middle-income country by 2021 and a developed nation by 2041. China has identified commerce, agriculture, industrial development, energy, and infrastructure development sectors of Bangladesh for its high priority investment and support. It assured Bangladesh of assisting in the construction of the Dhaka-Cox's Bazar broad-gauge rail lines, setting up of a coal-based power plant and a rice research centre, and exploration of oil and natural gas. It also wants to assist in defence, and information and communications technology sector, and maritime affairs. China also proposed signing a free-trade agreement (FTA) and emphasised importing jute and jute-goods from Bangladesh. Bangladesh agreed with China to quickly construct the proposed tunnel under the Karnaphuli river. China also assured Bangladesh of membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). During his visit, Wang also met President Abdul Hamid, leader of the opposition Raushan Ershad and BNP chief Khaleda Zia.

Prime Minister 's visit to Kuala Lumpur¹⁵

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina went to Kuala Lumpur on December 2 on a three-day official visit to seek recruitment of more Bangladeshis and expansion of trade and investment. She led a 100-member high-profile delegation composed of four ministers, a state minister and 35 leading businessmen, among others. This was Hasina's third visit to Malaysia as the prime minister after her two previous trips there in 2000 and 2010. Bangladesh and Malaysia agreed to boost bilateral trade, cut trade gap and start negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Kuala Lumpur assured Dhaka of extending support to it for becoming ASEAN'S dialogue partner and hosting the next meeting of Bangladesh-Malaysia Joint Commission in 2015. The assurance came at a bilateral meeting between the two countries at the Malaysian prime minister's office at Perdana Square in Putrajaya. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Malaysian counterpart Najib Abdul Razak led their respective countries at the meeting. Both the leaders agreed on duty-free and quota-free access of Bangladeshi products to Malaysian market, especially pharmaceuticals goods, cement, jute and jute products, ceramics and footwear. Bangladesh and Malaysia signed four deals on December 3. The four deals are: protocol amending the memorandum of understanding (MoU) of 2012 between Malaysia and Bangladesh on the employment of workers, MoU between Bangladesh and Malaysia on cooperation in the field of tourism, agreement between Bangladesh and Malaysia on the partial abolition of visa requirements and MoU between Bangladesh and Malaysia on cultural, arts and heritage cooperation. During her stay in Malaysia, former Malaysian premier and chairman of Malaysian car manufacturer Proton Holdings Berhad Dr. Mahathir Mohamad called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and expressed his company's plan to open a plant in Bangladesh soon.

Prime Minister Tsering Tobgay visits Dhaka¹⁶

Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay went to Dhaka on December 6 for holding talks with his Bangladesh counterpart on increasing bilateral trade, establishing connectivity, cooperation in power sector and tri-nation hydroelectricity generation. Bangladesh urged Bhutan to consider it as a partner

in its future hydropower projects as Dhaka and Thimphu agreed to bridge the existing trade gap between the two countries. The request was made at the bilateral talks between the two sides at the Prime Minister's Office on December 6. Bangladesh has unilaterally offered Bhutan to use Chittagong and Mongla seaports and also Lalmonirhat and Saidpur airports. Putting emphasis on enhancing cooperation in flood control and flood migration, she said more reliable flood forecast data from Bhutan would help Bangladesh tackle floods in the Brahmaputra basin. Bhutan needs skilled workers from Bangladesh, especially doctors. In response, Hasina requested him to hike the salaries of doctors. Tshering Tobgay urged his Bangladesh counterpart to use boulders instead of bricks in different construction projects in Bangladesh to protect ecological balance. The Bhutanese premier was accompanied by Foreign Minister Rinzin Dorje, Economic Affairs Minister Norbu Wangchuk, Director General (policy and planning) at the foreign ministry Sonam Tobden Rabgye and Chief Urban Designer Tashi Penjor. It was his first visit to Bangladesh since assuming office in July 2013. During their private conversation at the PMO, the Bhutanese Prime Minister handed over the copy of the historic felicitation message sent by the third King of Bhutan, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, to the then acting president Syed Nazrul Islam, recognising Bangladesh as an independent country to Hasina. In a move to enhance bilateral trade and commerce, Bangladesh and Bhutan signed two deals following the official talks led by Sheikh Hasina and Tshering Tobgay at the Prime Minister's Office: agreement on trade that will allow Dhaka and Thimphu to enjoy duty-free export of 90 items to each other and agreement on land allocation by Dhaka at the city's Baridhara to Bhutan for the construction of its permanent embassy. President Abdul Hamid emphasised Bhutan's active participation in sub-regional cooperation in water resources management and power-hydropower sector when the Bhutanese Prime Minister called on him at Bangabhaban on December 7. Leader of the Opposition Raushan Ershad also called on Tobgay at Sonargaon Hotel on December 7 and sought Bhutan's cooperation in hydropower and communication sectors. During his stay, Prime minister Tobgay also called on the ambassador of Korea to Bhutan, the ambassador of Thailand to Bhutan, and the ambassador of Turkey to Bhutan, who are based in Bangladesh. Prime Minister Tsering Tobgay concluded his three-day visit on December 8.

Director general-level conference between BGB and BSF held in Dhaka¹⁷

A four-day director general-level conference between Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and Indian Border Security Force (BSF) began in Dhaka on December 26. BSF chief Shri Devendra Kumar Pathak led a 19-member Indian delegation while the 23-member Border Guard delegation was led by its chief Major General Aziz Ahmed in the conference at the BGB Headquarters in Dhaka. The director general of India's Border Security Force, Devendra Kumar Pathak claimed that the force started using non-lethal weapons from 2010 that significantly reduced the border casualties, citing statistics that the number of deaths was 106 in 2007, which had been declining since 2010. The toll stood at 32 in 2010 and 11 in 2011, he added. A Joint Record of Discussions (JRD) was signed by the DGs. BGB chief Maj Gen Aziz Ahmed said the two forces agreed on several issues, including increased watch in vulnerable areas to stop cattle smuggling, more coordinated patrols especially at night, and deployment of Quick Reaction Teams (QRTs), and

awareness building among border people. Expressing grave concern over trafficking of arms, ammunition and explosives, the two sides agreed to fight those and other crimes like smuggling of Phensedyl and cattle. DG Aziz said it was agreed that the nodal officers would deal with any construction on a stretch of 150 yards of international border.

Delhi ready to sell 100MW to Bangladesh¹⁸

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said New Delhi was ready to sell 100MW of electricity to Bangladesh. He made the remark while responding to a request from Tawfique-e-Elahi Chowdhury, Advisor to Bangladesh Prime minister Sheikh Hasina, and Tripura state Chief Minister Manik Sarkar at the inaugural ceremony of the 750MW gas-driven Palatana power project in Udaipur of Tripura. Later, addressing a massive rally on the occasion there, Modi said if Bangladesh wanted to buy power from India, India was willing.

3 Rohingyas arrested¹⁹

Acting on a tip-off from Indian National Investigation Agency (NIA), detectives on November 30 arrested three Rohingyas at Lalbagh for their alleged links with suspected Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) operatives involved in Burdwan blast. This was the first instance of arrest since investigators of Bangladesh and India started sharing intelligence on militancy and decided to jointly tackle the cross-border menace.

BGB, Myanmar police force talk on stopping smuggling of Yaba pills²⁰

With Bangladesh stressing the need for stopping smuggling of Yaba pills through Myanmar border, a four-day additional director general-level conference between Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and Myanmar Police Force was held in Dhaka. BGB Additional DG Latiful Haider led the 16-member Bangladeshi team while Police Brig. Gen. Thein Oo headed the six-member Myanmarese delegation.

US assistant secretary Brownfield makes three days visit to Dhaka²¹

US Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs William R. Brownfield came to Dhaka on a three-day visit on December 6 to discuss America's support for policing, border security, and criminal justice efforts with the government officials.

Intersputnik to sell orbital slot to Bangladesh for its first satellite²²

Russian company Intersputnik won a contract to sell an orbital slot to Bangladesh for its first satellite Bangabandhu. Bangladesh government will have to pay around US \$36 million for the slot. As per the Bangabandhu satellite project outline, US \$28 million has been assigned for the purpose, but the vendor, Intersputnik, is firm on its asking price of US \$36 million. At present, Bangladesh's demand for a satellite is met by renting bandwidth from different satellite operators, which costs around US \$14 million a year. The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council sanctioned Tk 2,967 crore for the satellite project.

Bangladesh sends drinking water to Male²³

Bangladesh sent one lakh litres of drinking water and five desalination machines to the Maldives on December 7, two days after the lone desalination plant in the country's capital Male went out of order, leading to an extensive water crisis and subsequently to a state of emergency. With the supplies, Bangladesh Navy warship BNS Samudra Joy departed Chittagong on December 7.

Inflation comes down to 6.21 percent²⁴

Inflation continued its fall in November, coming down to 6.21 percent — the lowest in 24 months. The inflation rate, which has been showing a downward trend for the last several months, was 6.60 percent in October. Food inflation was the biggest driver behind the drop in overall inflation in November, sliding to 6.44 percent from 7.16 percent in October, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) data. Non-food inflation, however, continued to rise. It reached 5.84 percent in November from 5.74 percent in the previous month, due to a rise in house rent, transportation costs, education and medical expenses and other non-food items. The continuous decline in food prices on the international markets also helped food inflation come down.

Remittance rebounds in November²⁵

Remittance in November rose 14.7 percent to US \$1.17 billion from the previous month on the back of legalisation of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. November's receipts were over 10 percent higher than in the same month in 2013, according to data from Bangladesh Bank (BB). Banks' active role in remitting money from expatriates had also contributed to the growth, said Kazi Saidur Rahman, general manager of BB's foreign exchange reserve and treasury management department. Bangladesh received nearly US \$6.2 billion in remittances during the July-November period, up 11.42 percent year-on-year.

World Bank approves US \$1.1 billion for Bangladesh²⁶

The World Bank has approved approximately US \$1.1 billion for three projects to improve quality of primary education, build multipurpose shelters and promote child nutrition in Bangladesh.

Bhutan

No amendment will be made in the Election Act of Bhutan²⁷

The Election Commission of Bhutan welcomes the recent decision the National Assembly made not to amend the Election Act of Bhutan, 2008. "We're happy that the Parliament in its wisdom has found that the Election Act was in order and didn't see the need for an amendment," the Chief Election Commissioner, Dasho Kunzang Wangdi, said. However, he said, the commission is committed to make any changes in the rules that need to be improved. On November 24, with 27 parliament members voting against the amendment, the National Assembly resolved to not amend the Election Act. According to the legislative committee's chairperson, Lekey Dorji, discussions to amend the Act arose after the Anti Corruption Commission (ACC) presented its annual report to the house. Some members of Parliament said the need to review, and amend the Act came up following the resignation of the former prime minister, while some claim it came from the speaker's office following discussions with some MPs.

Bangladesh gifts plot for permanent Royal Bhutan mission in Dhaka²⁸

As a gift from Bangladesh to Bhutan, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina presented a plot of land to Prime Minister Tshearing Tobgay during his visit to Bangladesh to construct a permanent Royal Bhutan Embassy in Dhaka. Bhutan will build its permanent embassy on 3,200 sqm of land at Baridhara.

US-Bhutan looks at strengthening friendship²⁹

Visiting Bhutan for the first time, Chargé d Affairs of the Embassy of the United States of America, Ambassador Kathleen Stephens said she was in Bhutan to find out what the people of Bhutan and leaders thought on how the US and Bhutan could work together to achieve common goals. Ambassador Stephens went to Bhutan on December 19. Ambassador Stephens, who left the country on December 23, said she sees Bhutan filled with people with commitment and a vision that seeks to find a middle way in achieving a proper role in the 21st Century. The Fourth Druk Gyalpo granted an audience to Ambassador Stephens on December 22. Ambassador Stephens also called on Lyonchhoen Tshearing Tobgay at the Raven House on December 22. Lyonchhoen requested the Ambassador to reconsider increasing the number of fellowship programs especially for undergraduate courses in the United States. Ambassador Stephens said she would commit to explore and catalyse support and private funding for such programmes.

India approves Nu 238.8 million for Trashigang³⁰

Government of India under its small development project (SDP) programme, has approved about 95 percent of the projects proposed by Trashigang dzongkhag for the fiscal year 2014-2015. India approved 21 projects worth Nu 238.819 million. The dzongkhag had proposed for projects worth Nu 251.268 million. A majority of the approved projects include construction of new farm roads and blacktopping of the Gewog Center (GC) roads, which the department of road will do. Although funds are yet to be released, the dzongkhag has already completed ground works like surveys and design works. India has committed to release Nu 1.8 billion in the first year of the plan to fund SDPs in Bhutan. Government of India's total contribution for the plan stands at Nu 8.5 billion.

MIGA membership to improve FDI prospects³¹

Bhutan's admission as the 181st member of the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA) on December 8, is expected to expedite foreign direct investments (FDI) into the country. Bhutan's membership means that direct foreign investment into the country is eligible for the agency's investment guarantees. Likewise, investors from Bhutan going into MIGA's other member countries may also receive coverage for their investments. MIGA is the political risk insurance and credit enhancement arm of the World Bank Group that helps investors and lenders deal with risks by insuring eligible projects against losses relating to currency and political and civil disturbances, contract breaching and terrorism, among others. MIGA membership has come at a time when the government has pledged to be among the top 100 in ease of doing business index. For this, the government is also in the process of reviewing the FDI policy.

Lyonpo Dorji Choden addresses Lima conference³²

At the UN Climate Change Conference in Lima on December 11, Works and Human Settlement Minister Dorji Choden said that mountains are important not only to the mountain communities but also to the global community. The minister said that the latest report of the intergovernmental panel on climate change (IPCC) underscores the urgency of the challenges and threats faced by communities living in fragile mountain ecosystems that range from rapidly receding glaciers to vulnerable communities dependent on the forests that are rich in biodiversity. Addressing the delegates, the minister said: "We expect a clear decision on the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) in Lima, and call on all parties to provide ambitious actions in line with the levels called for by science and humanity." She emphasised the need for an agreement with special focus on implementation.

Trade deficit cross 2013 level by mid October³³

Bhutan's trade deficit as of October 2014 surpassed the 2013 figures. Trade deficit decreased by Nu 3.2 billion in 2013 compared with 2012, but the provisional trade statistics with figures compiled between January until mid-October in 2014 reveals a deficit of Nu 22.9 billion. In 2013, the deficit was Nu 21.42 billion according to the Bhutan Trade Statistics.

Inflation down to seven percent³⁴

The annual inflation rate came down to 7.03 percent in October 2014 after swaying between 8 and 9 percent for most of the year. Inflation rate between September 2013 to September 2014 was 8.36 percent. According to the latest National Statistical Bureau's (NSB) consumer price index (CPI), food prices dropped to 6.6 percent in October from 9.14 percent in September. Specifically, inflation from October 2013 to October 2014 was recorded at 6.6 percent; while for the period from September 2013 to September 2014, it was 9.14 percent. Domestic inflation contributed 7.10 percent and imported inflation contributed 7.08 percent. An official from NSB attributed the drop to the decreasing fuel price since July 2014. Fuel prices, according to the CPI, have dropped from 5 percent in August to 1.8 percent in October.

Maldives

Male water crisis³⁵

Water supply was disrupted in Malé, the capital of the Maldives, after a serious fire accident incapacitated the only provider of water in the city on December 4. Water was cut off in Male' and people were left without access to water for basic needs, including drinking water. India was the first country to provide aid during water crisis. In that regard, water has been delivered to Maldives in Indian military aircrafts and two navy ships. India has donated 1000 tons of water by an Indian navy vessel, in addition to the 475 tons of bottled drinking water. China government also has contributed a lot of support during water crisis. Water from all commercial flights of China had been delivered to Maldives as free donations during that period of time. Water was also delivered to Maldives by China in two military aircrafts and in a navy ship. Apart from this, while a navy ship from Bangladesh arrived in Maldives with water, Sri Lanka has also sent water to Maldives by commercial

flights. After water issue was resolved on December 15, several countries have given financial donations to Maldives. In that regard, governments of Malaysia, Bahrain and Japan, Batelco and a millionaire of Saudi Arabia has donated financial support to Male' Water Crisis Management Fund. The government of Japan has donated US \$843,060 and the government of Malaysia has pledged \$200,000 to the Male' Water Crisis Management Fund. In a ceremony held at Islamic Center on December 24, thanking to countries that offered support during water crisis, President Yameen said that some countries have provided quick assistance to Maldives regardless of their costs during water crisis.

India's National Security Advisor meets President³⁶

India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, paid a courtesy call on President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom on December 3. According to President's Office, President and the National Security Advisor explored avenues to further strengthen bilateral relations between Maldives and India, particularly in the area of security. Presidents' Office said that President Yameen assured Shri Doval of his Administration's firm resolve to continue cooperating with India in the interest of regional peace and security by highlighting the special historical relationship between the two countries. Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dunya Maumoon; Minister at the President's Office, Mohamed Hussain Shareef; the Foreign Secretary, Dr. Ali Naseer Mohamed; High Commissioner of India to Maldives, Rajeev Shahare, and Joint Secretary of India's Ministry of External Affairs, Suchitra Durai also joined at the call.

China, Maldives sign preliminary accord on bridge construction³⁷

China and Maldives have signed an accord to conduct preliminary study on constructing a bridge that would connect capital Male with the city's international airport. This would be followed by a full-scale project feasibility study, yielding a design plan, which would result in the two sides exploring possible funding options for the project. In September, Chinese President Xi Jinping said in Male that he hoped that the bridge would be named "China-Maldives Friendship Bridge."

President of CMEC meets President Yameen³⁸

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom met with the President of China Machinery Engineering Corporation (CMEC), Zhang Chun on December 9. At the meeting held at the President's Office, discussions were focused on the investment opportunities available in the Maldives. In this regard, President Yameen shared with Zheng, potential areas of investment in the Maldives, in the fields of commerce, housing, tourism and power generation. President Yameen thanked CMEC and the Government of China for facilitating the 1,000 housing units project.

People's Majlis passed the budget bill³⁹

The People's Majlis passed the Budget Bill for 2015 on December 10. 60 members voted in favour of passing the Budget Bill, while 19 members voted no. Before the Speaker moved to a vote on the Bill itself, he tabled votes on 18 budget recommendations made to amend the Bill. However, none of those amendment

recommendations gained enough votes to sustain itself. Submitting the Bill to the Majlis, Abdullah Jihad, the Minister of Finance had said that 65 percent of the budget for the 2015 has been set for recurrent expenditure, totaling some 15.8 billion Rufiyaa. 13 percent of the budget would be spent on social security and welfare. Government income for 2015 has been estimated to be about 21.5 billion Rufiyaa.

China-Maldives hold first joint committee on trade and economic cooperation⁴⁰

The first meeting of the Joint Committee on Trade and Economic Cooperation between China and the Maldives was held in Beijing on December 16. A high-level delegation consisting of Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture Dr. Mohamed Shainee, Minister of Economic Development Mohamed Saeed, and Minister at the President's Office Mohamed Hussain Shareef went to China to attend the first meeting of the China-Maldives Joint Commission. After the first meeting of the Joint Committee on Trade and Economic Cooperation, the Maldives has signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China on joining the Maritime Silk Route. The MoU enables Maldives to take an active role in the construction of the 21st century Maritime Silk Route, strengthen information sharing on national economic development plans, and facilitate more Chinese investment in the Maldives. The Ministry of Economic Development said that the governments also reached an agreement regarding initiating discussions on concluding a Free Trade Agreement between the two countries, under which Maldivian fish exporters will enjoy duty concessions for products entering the China market. The agreement will also facilitate the removal of non-tariff barriers that are encountered by traders in cross-border trade between the two countries.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian affairs meets President⁴¹

The US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Nisha Biswal paid a courtesy call on President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom on December 17. At the meeting held at the President's Office, President Yameen and the Assistant Secretary of State exchanged views on enhancing the close friendly relations that exist between the Maldives and the United States. The Assistant Secretary of State also inquired about the efforts and steps undertaken by the Maldives on the socioeconomic development of the country. The President and the Assistance Secretary of State further discussed ways to strengthen cooperation in the international arena on areas of mutual concern such as global fight against terrorism. Nisha Biswal also met with Minister of Foreign Affairs Dunya Maumoon. Nisha Biswal, in a statement upon conclusion of her visit to the Maldives, applauded the Maldives for its accomplishments in relation to democracy, but said that the country still faces challenges such as judicial independence and instances of politically-motivated threats.

Saudi delegates visits Maldives⁴²

A high level delegation from Saudi Arabia consisting of members from economic sector and heads of economic institutions came to Maldives on December 23. A twitter message posted by the Islamic Minister Dr. Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed said that the delegation from Saudi Arabia consists of 16 members including deputy ministers and senior officials from economic institutions.

President Yameen sends message of sympathy to Pakistan⁴³

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom sent a messages of sympathy to President Mamnoon Hussain and Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan, on learning of the attack at the Army Public School in Peshawar, which led to the tragic loss of life and injury to over a hundred victims. In separate messages sent to the President and Prime Minister, President Yameen strongly condemned this act of terror and expressed the solidarity of the Maldivian people towards Pakistan in all its efforts in maintaining peace. The President also expressed the firm commitment of the Maldives, to the fight against the global menace of terrorism.

Japan donates medical equipment to Maldives⁴⁴

Government of Japan has donated medical equipment worth JPY 200 million, under its Non-project Grant Aid program. The donation was presented at a ceremony at the Ministry of Health on December 16, by the Chief of Japan International Cooperation System (JICS), and accepted by Minister of Health Mohamed Nazim. At the ceremony, the Health Ministry also presented a certificate in appreciation of Japan's generous aid to the Maldives. Japan also provided equipment worth JPY 59.7 million to the Maldives under the same program in 2012.

President inaugurates link road project in Laamu Atoll⁴⁵

The Link Road project in Laamu Atoll, to be implemented under free aid from the government of China, has been inaugurated by President Abdulla Yameen. The inauguration ceremony was held in Laamu Fonadhoo on December 15, 2014. Speaking at the ceremony, Minister of Housing and Infrastructure Dr. Mohamed Muizzu said that the cost of the project is US \$30 million, and that the Chinese contractor has assured that it would be completed within 18 months. The agreement regarding this project was signed between the two governments during the visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to the Maldives in September 2014.

Tourist arrivals reach 1.1 million by the end of November 2014⁴⁶

The Ministry of Tourism has announced that the total tourist arrivals in the Maldives had reached 1,101,113 by the end November 2014. The ministry said that this is an increase of 7.9 percent when compared with tourist arrivals at the end of November 2013, which stood at 1,020,190. The ministry said that at the end of November 2014, Asia and the Pacific was the leading market generator, with 546,278 tourists having arrived from that region. The overall growth of the region at the end of November 2014 was 13.6 percent. The second largest market generating region was Europe, with 477,123 tourists and 0.8 percent growth. Out of individual markets, the highest tourist arrivals in the first 11 months of 2014 was from China. The number of tourists that visited Maldives from China during this period was 345,395, which constitutes a growth of 11.1 percent. The number of tourists who visited Maldives in November 2014 was 89,778. This is an increase of 5.1 percent when compared with November 2013.

Parliament passes extradition bill⁴⁷

The parliament has passed the extradition bill, to facilitate the handover of persons accused or convicted crimes to foreign countries in which the crimes were committed. The bill was passed on December 25, with 58 votes in favour, and two against. The bill states that persons can be extradited for the trial if they have been indicted for a crime; for sentencing if he has been convicted of a crime, but not sentenced; and for the execution of the sentence if he has been convicted and sentenced. The bill states that Maldivians shall not be extradited to other countries, but if a country requests the extradition of a particular person, the person must be indicted for the crime in the Maldives if possible. According to the bill, persons can only be extradited for crimes which carry sentences of minimum one year imprisonment in the country in which the crime was committed.

Abdullah Saeed sworn in as new Chief Justice⁴⁸

Supreme Court Justice Abdullah Saeed has been sworn in as the new Chief Justice of the Maldives on December 15, soon after the People's Majilis approved his nomination by President Abdulla Yamin Abdul Gayoom.

Independence of Judiciary declines in Maldives⁴⁹

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, Gabriela Knaul, has said that since her visit to the Maldives in February 2013, there has been a series of developments in the country that point at a serious deterioration of respect for the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. This came in a statement by the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, dated December 22, 2014, in which she expressed serious concern about the recent removal of Supreme Court judges, former Chief Justice Ahmed Faiz and Muthasim Adnan. The two judges were removed after the parliament passed an Amendment Bill to the Judicature Act, to reduce the number of Supreme Court judges from seven to five. Knaul called upon the authorities of the Maldives to reconsider the removal of former Chief Justice Ahmed Faiz and Judge Muthasim Adnan and to engage in a transparent, impartial and independent process in line with its international human rights obligations. The Commonwealth Lawyers Association (CLA), the Commonwealth Legal Education Association (CLEA), and the Commonwealth Magistrates' and Judges' Association (CMJA) have also said in a joint statement issued on December 16, that the adoption of the Amendment to the Judicature Act, and the subsequent removal of Chief Justice Ahmed Faiz and Judge Muthasim Adnan, constitute a clear breach of the Commonwealth Principles.

Nepal

Chinese foreign minister visits Nepal⁵⁰

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang came to Kathmandu on December 25 for a three-day official visit. Wang said that the purpose of his visit was to review the past and to work on how to celebrate the 60th years of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Minister Wang attended a foreign ministerial level talk on December 26 and subsequently held discussions with President Ram Baran Yadav, Prime Minister Sushil Koirala and leaders of various political parties. Wang had previously visited Nepal 11 years ago. During a meeting with Prime Minister Sushil Koirala,

Wang said Nepal is a good neighbour and friend. "We want to see a peaceful, united, developed and prosperous Nepal". In the meeting, PM Koirala apprised Wang on Nepal's constitution-writing process. The PM called for Chinese investments and assistance in infrastructure building, tourism and connectivity.

China extends facility to 199 more products⁵¹

China has agreed to provide duty-free, quota-free market access to 8,030 Nepali goods by December 2015. In a bilateral agreement signed on December 5, the Chinese side extended the facility to an additional 199 products, including cooking utensils, outfits, footwear, and tooth paste and brush. Other products include those related to beauty parlours and toiletries, printing paper, buttons made up of animal bones, animal products, medicinal oil and products, pen, daily goods made up of birds' feather and plastic products. Ministry of Commerce and Supplies (MoCS) Secretary Narayan Gopal Malego and Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Wu Chuntai signed the letter of exchange.

Nepal forwards revised BIPPA draft to China⁵²

Government of Nepal has finally communicated with China, stating its readiness to sign the Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (BIPPA). China had proposed the agreement signing three years ago. The Ministry of Industry, through the Foreign Ministry, forwarded the revised BIPPA draft for China's endorsement after Industry Minister Mahesh Basnet approved the draft after holding inter-ministerial discussions. Nepal has already signed BIPPA with six other countries, including France, Germany, Britain, Mauritius, Qatar, Finland and India.

Nepal, China sign currency swap deal⁵³

Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) and the People's Bank of China (PBoC) signed a currency swap deal enabling the settlement of both cross-border and ordinary trade. The agreement was signed on December 23 in Beijing during a meeting between NRB Governor Yubaraj Khatiwada and PBoC Governor Zhou Xiaochuan. The deal is expected to further facilitate trade between the two countries. Earlier, in June 2013, the two central banks had signed a memorandum of understanding paving the way for Nepal to invest in Chinese securities.

Second Sino-Nepal trade route opens⁵⁴

In a major boost for bilateral trade between Nepal and China, one more cross-border trading route has come into operation. With China officially opening the Gyirong Port on the Rasuwagadhi border on December 1, the second land route has opened for bilateral trade. For long, the Tatopani border was the sole trade transit with China. The new route has historical importance as it was a busy trade link between Tibet and Nepal during the Lichchhavi and Malla periods. Besides, the newly opened route is linked with the Chinese government's railway project. Hari Prasad Bashyal, Nepal's consular general in Lhasa, and Dong Mingjun, vice-chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region government, jointly inaugurated the facility. The development is in line with China's commitment to support Nepal in upgrading six dry ports at major customs points, including Rasuwagadhi. China

had agreed to strengthen these points under the agreement “Management of Ports on the China-Nepal Border” during the Nepal visit of then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in January 2012. China has agreed to strengthen Pular-Yari, Jilong-Rasuwa, Zangmu-Kodari, and Riwu-Olangchug Gola border crossings, among others.

China seeks party-to-party ties with NC, UML, Maoists⁵⁵

Chen Fengxiang, vice minister at the International Department of the CPC Central Committee that looks after China’s relations with South Asia, has sought strong relations with the major political parties of Nepal. In a meeting with the top leaders on December 15 and 16, he underlined the need for high-level contact between the Nepali and Chinese political leadership as well as medium rank leaders. In a meeting with Prime Minister Sushil Koirala, CPN-UML Chairman KP Oli, UCPN (Maoist) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal and CPN-Maoist Chairman Mohan Bairya, Chen conveyed his message that China backs the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Nepal as well as the country’s economic development.

Nepal, China sign MoU on media cooperation⁵⁶

Minister for Information and Communications Minendra Rijal on behalf the Government of Nepal and Minister for State Council, Information Office of China Cai Mingzhao on behalf of the Chinese government signed an MoU, with the objective of promoting mutual cooperation in the IT sector and collaborating on matters related to the media during Rijal’s week-long visit to China. As per the MoU, the major areas of cooperation include exchange of information, sharing of experience and views on policy and regulation; intensifying exchange of visits and communication between the departments of information of the two countries; share experience and cooperation in the field of the Internet. The Rijal-led Nepali delegation also visited Research and Development section of Huawei and ZTE and took stock of the latest technologies that the global IT companies are developing for the coming generation.

China provides relief to flood victims

Government of China has provided relief materials to the flood and landslide victims of Nepal. The Chinese government handed over the relief materials to the Government of Nepal on December 4, 2014. Hebei Machinery Import and Export Company Chief, Zhao Hansang, handed over the materials to Kodari based Immigration Official Pralhad Pokharel. The provided materials include 100 metric tonnes rice, 115 metric tonnes mineral water and 240 tents.

Nepal, India agree to simplify procedure⁵⁸

Nepal and India have agreed to simplify procedures for the US \$1billion line of credit (LoC) to be received from Exim Bank of India. The two countries had signed a loan agreement during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Nepal visit for the 18th SAARC Summit. India has put in place flexible terms and conditions for the new line of credit, including interest rate and commitment fee. The interest rate has been set one percent, while the commitment charge has been reduced to 0.25 percent from 0.5 percent. India will not charge any service fee. Earlier, it charged 0.25 percent. India has reduced the quantity of India-made goods to be

used in the project and approved Indian-Nepali joint-venture contractors. Secretary at the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure Tulasi Sitaula said as the main objective of the Exim Bank is to ensure Indian goods and services are used in projects where the funds go. Nepal government has almost finalised the projects in which the newly announced soft loan will be used. They include Budhigandaki Hydroelectric Project, Mahakali III Irrigation Project, Koshi Pump Canal, and a multilane motorable bridge over the Mahakali River in Mahendranagar.

Nepal-India security talks⁵⁹

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs Bamdev Gautam has asked the Indian authorities to help curb terrorism, import and export of illegal drugs, human trafficking, smuggling of fake Indian currency notes flourishing along the open and porous Nepal-India border. During a meeting with visiting Director General of Indian Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) B.D. Sharma in his office on December 5, Minister Gautam also raised the issue of mistreatment and harassment of Nepali citizens by SSB personnel while returning home from India. Sharma, along with his four Inspector Generals of SSB, came to Kathmandu on December 5 to attend the 2nd meeting of Chief of Armed Police Force and SSB Director General on December 6.

Nepal to bear 27 percent cost for the Amalekhgunj-Raxaul pipeline⁶⁰

Nepal will be funding 27 percent of the total estimated cost to develop the proposed 41km Amalekhgunj-Raxaul petroleum pipeline, according to the final draft prepared by the joint-committee meeting of Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) and Indian Oil Corporation (IOC). Of the total estimated cost of Rs 4.40 billion, the Indian government will extend Rs 3.20 billion in grants, while the rest will be mobilised by Nepal. According to NOC, the committee has forwarded the final draft with the revised investment proposal and recommendation to their respective governments. The Indian government had pledged constructing the much-delayed pipeline project in grants. However, the financial modality was revised after Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat expressed concerns that Nepal should also share the project costs. NOC Managing Director Chandika Prasad Bhatta said that the pipeline construction cost has also been revised to Rs 2.40 billion. Earlier, it was estimated to cost Rs 4 billion, including land acquisition. Meanwhile, Bhatta said Rs 2 billion would be mobilised to upgrade infrastructure, including capacity enhancement, at NOC's Amalekhgunj depot. The draft has been sent to the Ministry of Commerce and Supplies. Once the Cabinet approves the proposed draft, the two governments will sign the agreement. NOC said it had also proposed IOC to allow private sector players to use the pipeline's products. The joint team has also revised the project cost, which was previously estimated to cost around Rs 9 billion, including the Amalekhgunj depot automation. But it was reduced as the joint team agreed to use the shortest route to lay the pipeline. Of the three proposed routes for construction, both sides have agreed to construct the road-to-road alignment that includes laying the pipeline along the 26km Amalekhgunj-Pathlaiya road and 12km forest areas. IOC had proposed building the cross-border pipeline in 1995. A memorandum of understanding was signed between NOC and IOC in September 1996 at the junior-executive level. In 2004, the two sides struck another deal at the chief executive level. The much-delayed project picked up pace after

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his Nepal visit in the first week of August, promised to build the pipeline. The pipeline is expected to reduce transportation costs by as much as 50 percent, control leakage and ensure hassle-free transfer and quality of petroleum products.

Nepal seeks adequate climate funds for LDCs⁶¹

Nepal, on behalf of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), has urged the international community to commit adequate funding to help the most vulnerable societies to deal with negative impacts of climate change. Addressing the opening session of the global climate negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change at Lima in Peru, Ram Prasad Lamsal, chair of the LDC group that comprises 49 countries, including Nepal, said though the pledges on climate change adaptation, including the fund allocation to the Green Climate Fund (GCF), are encouraging, they are not sufficient to deal with the increasing and intensifying risks associated with climate change in LDCs due to limited capabilities to respond and cope to these adverse impacts. "We are still very far from reaching our target of at least 100 billion dollars per year by 2020 as committed by the developed countries in 2009. We urge concerned nations to scale up their contributions to the GCF and the Least Developed Countries Fund," he said in a statement during the opening session.

Foreign Affairs Minister Pandey meets UNDOC official⁶²

Foreign Affairs Minister Mahendra Bahadur Pandey held a meeting with the Executive Director of United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Yury Fedotov on December 4. In the meeting, Pandey stated that Nepal had benefited from UNODC Regional Programme for South Asia that focused on transnational crime, anti-corruption and preventing terrorism among others. He urged for a more enhanced level of support from UNODC to counter drug abuse, human trafficking and terrorism. Fedotov said that he was in Nepal to assess programmes run by UNODC and to explore their future course. He stated that his Office would continue to support Nepal in its fight against organised crimes such as drug and human trafficking, wildlife poaching, corruption and terrorism. The UNODC executive director arrived in Kathmandu on December 4 on his maiden four-day visit to Nepal.

UN asks Nepal to work on deteriorating conditions of human rights⁶³

The Geneva-based UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has called on the Nepal government to implement and adopt dozens of civil, cultural, social and economic rights, enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Under no circumstance the rights already acquired by women and marginalised individual and groups should be restricted, the committee has said in its Nepal-specific report that was adopted on November 28, 2014. The recommendation and decision was first forwarded from Geneva to Nepal government for the latter's consideration before it was made public. The UN committee has also called on the government to end corruption, expressing concerns that it has hampered people's access to resources to enjoy economic, social and cultural rights. As Nepal is a party to the Covenant, the recommendation and

adoption made by the UN committee are binding and mandatory for execution. The committee has also noted that the process of consideration of the claims for recognition by some indigenous peoples has not yet completed. The UN committee has also renewed its call to adopt national refugee protection framework with the 2007 Supreme Court order. The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has also said that the human rights situation in Nepal has deteriorated, and as a result, the country is headed towards becoming a police state. In a statement issued on the occasion of the International Human Rights Day on December 10, the rights organisation said that the state security agencies and justice institutions in Nepal are heavily politicised and corrupt, making justice impossible for commoners.

President condemns terrorist attack in Pak school⁶⁴

President Ram Baran Yadav said that he was deeply saddened to learn of the terrorist attack at a school in Peshawar, on December 16 resulting in the killing and injury of a large number of innocent children. "I strongly condemn this heinous crime against humanity," the President said in a condolence message to his Pakistani counterpart M. Mamnoon Hussain on December 17.

Nepal owes Rs 351 billion in external debt⁶⁵

Nepal's external debt rose by one percent to Rs 351.77 billion during the first quarter of 2014-15 fiscal year while internal debt position remained unchanged. During the first quarter, the country received Rs 8.5 million in external debt, while the government did not raise domestic debt as its treasury held a massive amount for unspent budget. The internal debt has now remained unchanged at Rs 206.68 billion from the end of last fiscal, according to a quarterly report about the country's debt situation prepared by Financial Comptroller General Office (FCGO). According to the report, external debt now constitutes 63 percent of the country's total debt amounting to Rs 558.45 billion. Of the total external debt received during the first quarter, bilateral sources contributed Rs 5.3 billion (62 percent) of the total debt. Nepal has to pay Rs 146.73 billion to the ADB. Nepal owes Rs 13.61 billion to Japan, the highest among bilateral creditors, followed by China's Rs 10.35 billion.

Armed group announces ceasefire⁶⁶

Khumbuwan Mukti Morcha (Samyukta), an armed ethnic outfit demanding separate federal state, has unilaterally announced ceasefire. General Secretary of the outfit David Khambu announced the truce amid a press meet at Charkoshe forest in Dharan on December 30. He said the group decided to struggle through peaceful way. The outfit put forth a 13-point demand including the creation of a Khumbuwan state with right to self-determination.

Pakistan

Taliban attacks Peshawar school, 141 killed⁶⁷

At least 141 people, most of them children (132), died when Taliban gunmen attacked the Army Public School in Peshawar on December 16. The overwhelming majority of the victims were students at the school, which has children and teenagers in grades 1-10. Condemnations poured in from across the globe including all major political leaders and notables in the country. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Army Chief General Raheel Sharif also condemned the assault and rushed to

Peshawar to show their support for the victims and the troops partaking in the operation to clear the school of terrorists. Three-day mourning was also announced by the federal government.

General Raheel Sharif visits Kabul⁶⁸

On his visit to Kabul on December 17, Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Raheel Sharif sought handover of top Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan chief Mullah Fazalullah who is wanted for terrorism cases in Pakistan. The army chief shared classified intelligence details with the Afghan officials and revealed to them that the mastermind behind the Peshawar attack, who was from Afghanistan, was giving directives to terrorists. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said Afghanistan stands with the people of Pakistan in their hour of grief. General Raheel Sharif also met International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commander General Joseph Dunford. Dunford condemned the attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar and assured Pakistan of complete cooperation in countering terrorism and in security related matters.

Nawaz Sharif removes moratorium on death penalty⁶⁹

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif approved the removal of moratorium on death penalty after the carnage in Peshawar killed 141 people. Addressing an All Parties Conference (APC) in Peshawar, the premier announced that the moratorium on death penalty, which was imposed under international pressure, has been lifted. US State Department spokesperson Marie Harf said that the lifting of the moratorium on the death penalty in Pakistan is the latter's internal issue. On the issue of human rights bodies asking Pakistan to go back to the same moratorium on executions, Harf said the US did not have a position to outline on the said matter. The European Union (EU), however, has sharply reacted over lifting of the moratorium on the death penalty in Pakistan, and has demanded its immediate restoration. UN chief Ban Ki-moon has also pressed Pakistan to end capital punishment and restore a moratorium on the death penalty the government lifted in terror cases following the Taliban school massacre in Peshawar. Pakistan Government rejected calls by the United Nations and the European Union to revive moratorium on execution of convicts, noting that capital punishment for terrorists did not violate international law.

Imran Khan announces end of PTI protests⁷⁰

The Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) on December 17 decided to end their countrywide sit-in protests in light of the terrorist attack on a school in Peshawar and said that the country needed national unity. "Due to the situation in the country right now, we have decided to end our protests," PTI Chairman Imran Khan told party supporters in Islamabad.

Lakhvi granted bail⁷¹

Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, one of the main accused in the Mumbai attacks case, was granted bail on December 18 by an anti-terrorism court. The Federal Investigation Agency's prosecutor disagreed with the bail plea. However, Advocate Rizwan Abbasi, the lawyer representing Lakhvi, stood before the court as the bail was

approved. The court has directed Lakhvi to pay surety bonds worth Rs 500,000 before he can be released on bail. India reacted very strongly on the bail granted to the LeT commander. In a statement, the Indian Home Ministry said, "It's very unfortunate, especially as it comes just after the Peshawar massacre. Pakistan must appeal in the next court. Pakistan needs to show more seriousness in taking 26/11 case trial to its logical conclusion." Indian foreign ministry spokesman Syed Akbaruddin said the decision to grant bail to Lakhvi was "a reassurance to terrorists who perpetuate heinous crimes". "We cannot accept that LeT's chief operations commander, Lakhvi, one of the key conspirators of the Mumbai terror attacks... a person designated as international terrorist by UN security council, is released on bail," Akbaruddin said. "We call upon Pakistan to immediately take steps to reverse this decision," he told journalists in Delhi. Following the furious response from New Delhi, Pakistani prosecutors announced they would appeal against it.

Pakistan warns India against issuing 'provocative' statements⁷²

Pakistan strongly reacted on December 13 to Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar's statement saying the country was fully capable to defend itself and thwart any aggression. According to a report published on The Times of India website on December 12, Parrikar warned Pakistan of a "strong response" after alleging it for aiding and abetting cross-border terrorism. "I feel that there has to be some strong response which will once and for all reduce these blatant attempts. It's an open secret that they (militants) came from Pakistan," said Defence Minister of India. Jaitley was also criticised by Pakistan for issuing a statement in which he threatened the neighbouring country to choose between Indian government and Kashmiri separatist leaders. "Allegations levelled against Pakistan in such statements by Indian Ministers are unfounded and provocative," Foreign Office spokesperson Tasneem Aslam said in a statement issued on December 13. She said such statements were not conducive to peace in the region. The spokesperson warned that there must not be any miscalculation about Pakistan's resolve to defend itself and thwart any aggression. Parrikar's statement came following his first official visit to Kashmir to review the security situation there.

Pakistan detains 58 Indian fishermen⁷³

Pakistani marine forces on December 11 arrested 58 Indian fishermen for allegedly violating territorial waters in the Arabian Sea. Such arrests are frequently carried out by both countries, as the maritime border in the Arabian Sea is poorly defined and many fishing boats lack the technology needed to be certain of their precise location.

India releases four Pakistani prisoners⁷⁴

India handed over four Pakistani prisoners to Rangers personnel at Lahore's Wagah Border on December 2. Mohammad Alamgir, Hafiz Noman Butt, Javed Alam Shumail and Shahnawaz were released in return for the 36 Indian fishermen that were earlier repatriated to India from jails in Karachi. Out of the four, one was a fisherman while three others were civilians.

Pakistan-Iran border cooperation⁷⁵

Iranian authorities have indicated to open nine more zero-point gates on the Pak-Iran border along with five districts of Balochistan for increasing trade with Pakistan. The idea was discussed at a meeting of the Pak-Iran Permanent Border Committee held recently in Mir Javah, an Iranian town on the Pak-Iran border. Deputy Commissioners of five districts — Gwadar, Chagai, Turbat, Panjgur and Washuk — and senior officials of Frontier Corps represented Pakistan. The Iranian team headed by Deputy Director Law-Enforcement Hasan Najad comprised 10 senior civil and military officials. The officials of two countries had decided to hold a meeting of the Pak-Iran Permanent Committee after every six months and a meeting of officials of districts of both the countries along with the border would be held every month.

Afghan army chief and the ISAF commander meet General Raheel Sharif⁷⁶

Chief of General Staff of the Afghan National Army (ANA) General Sher Muhammad Karimi, along with Commander of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) John Cambell, called on Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Raheel Sharif at the General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi on December 23, according to an Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) press release. The Afghan army chief and the ISAF commander assured their full support in the war against terrorism as well as in eliminating terrorists on Afghan soil.

"John Kerry terms Pak Army a truly binding force": DG ISPR⁷⁷

Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif met with US Secretary of State John Kerry on November 30 at the US Department of State, according to a Twitter update by Director General of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Major General Asim Bajwa. During the meeting General Raheel Sharif presented Pakistan's perspective on regional security issues. US Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledged Pakistan's role in fighting terror and the sacrifices rendered by the country. He also praised the professionalism of Pakistan Army and termed the institution a 'truly binding force'. Kerry also welcomed progress on improved ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan as a step towards regional stability and assured the United States' full support in this regard. Gen. Sharif went to the United States on a two-week visit for talks on strategic issues and on Operation Zarb-i-Azb.

No hidden motive behind army chief's extended visit: US⁷⁸

The US State Department rejected the suggestion that Army Chief General Raheel Sharif's long stay in the United States had any hidden motive. The department's Deputy Spokesperson Marie Harf told a briefing in Washington that since US Secretary of State John Kerry was out of the country when General Sharif first came to Washington, the two sides decided to have the meeting on Nov 30. She noted that Secretary Kerry was travelling in Europe when the army chief came.

US to provide US \$11 million for Karachi surveillance network⁷⁹

The United States of America has announced an US \$11 million assistance to develop Karachi's closed-circuit television (CCTV) monitoring system, during a book launch at the Central Police Office on December 9. Assistant Secretary of

State of the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) William R. Brownfield made this announcement as part of an added assistance provided by the INL to the Sindh police apart from a \$500,000 project assisting its Sindh curriculum development programme (SCDP).

US provides \$34 million aid to combat malnutrition⁸⁰

The United States of America has contributed an additional US \$34 million to the World Food Programme (WFP) on December 22 which would provide food ration to 3.2 million Pakistanis for the next four months to help them combat malnutrition. The new US funding will enable the WFP to transform approximately 71,000 tons of wheat, donated by Pakistan, into fortified flour. The aid will also be used to purchase, locally and regionally, more than 29,000 tons of food commodities for distribution in Pakistan.

PM leaves for UK to attend London Conference on Afghanistan⁸¹

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif went to the UK on December 2 to attend the London Conference on Afghanistan. Prime Minister was accompanied by his Adviser on Foreign Affairs and National Security Sartaj Aziz and Special Assistant Tariq Fatemi. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif talked to the US Secretary of State John Kerry on the sidelines of the London Conference. The prime minister discussed the regional situation with Kerry as well as the ongoing Operation Zarb-i-Azb. He said 80 per cent of the area had been cleared of militants, adding that the operation would continue until the complete elimination of militants. Sharif said a stable, prosperous and democratic Afghanistan was in Pakistan's best interest, adding that Pakistan looked forward to having a good working relationship with the new Afghan government.

Turkish experts arrive to train counter-terror force⁸²

Four senior officers of the Turkish National Police have joined two-month specialised training as instructors of the first batch of 468 corporals recruited by the Punjab Counter-Terrorism Department as a part of new Anti-Terrorism Force. They joined by a Turkish team on December 7 to conduct longest-ever training session of corporals at Elite Police Training School, Badian Lahore. A group of 42 Turkish police experts of different ranks would impart training to 930 corporals of first two batches from Dec 1, 2014, to March 31, 2015, in two phases.

Chinese minister for public security meets Pakistani leadership⁸³

China has assured that it is ready to work with Pakistan to implement the consensus reached by the leaders of both countries, steadily promote the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and continuously enhance the Pakistan-China Strategic Cooperative Partnership. "The assurance was given by Chinese State Councillor Guo Shengkun during his meetings with President Mamnoon Hussain, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and other leaders," Foreign Office spokesperson said in a statement on December 8. During the three-day visit, State Councillor Guo Shengkun called on Pakistani leadership and conveyed cordial greetings and good wishes from Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang to their respective counterparts. "During his visit, State Councillor Guo Shengkun

held detailed talks with the Federal Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, Adviser to the Prime Minister on National Security and Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, and Chief of the Army Staff General Raheel Sharif," the Foreign Office statement said. The Chinese dignitaries acknowledged Pakistan's efforts in fight against terrorism and towards regional stability. They appreciated the successes achieved in Operation Zarb-i-Azb being carried out by the military against militants in North Waziristan.

Pakistan deplores CIA torture of detainees: Foreign Office⁸⁴

The Foreign Office of Pakistan on December 11 condemned the US Senate's report on Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) torture of detainees and said steps taken for countering terrorism must be transparent. "Pakistan deplores the Senate report on CIA torture of detainees. It is violation of international laws. Human rights laws must be respected," said spokeswoman Tasneem Aslam, during the foreign office's weekly briefing in Islamabad.

Pakistan's ranking in corruption index improves⁸⁵

Pakistan's ranking in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2014 has improved and the Transparency International (TI), which released the report on December 2, has expressed the hope that Islamabad will work more vigorously to combat the menace. The TI described Pakistan's CPI score of 29 out of 100 and ranking of 126 among 175 countries as the best. The country has never achieved this distinction since the first CPI was issued in 1995. Pakistan had secured the score of 28 and was ranked 127th among 177 countries in 2013, according to statistics released by Berlin-based non-profit organisation committed to promoting accountability, integrity and transparency.

Sri Lanka

National Security Adviser of India visits Sri Lanka⁸⁶

National Security Adviser (NSA) of India Dr. Ajit Kumar Doval delivered the Keynote address at the inaugural session of the Galle Dialogue 2014. Evoking a 1971 UNGA resolution, on the Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, Doval said it was important to revisit the resolution mooted by Sri Lanka then "calling upon great powers not to allow escalation and expansion of military presence in the Indian Ocean." During his stay in Sri Lanka, leader of Sri Lanka's opposition and United National Party (UNP) Ranil Wickremasinghe met Ajit Doval and discussed the current political situation in Sri Lanka. The NSA has reportedly enquired about the election strategy and campaign plans of the common platform that the UNP is backing. Also the issue of China's role in Sri Lanka, which is a major concern for India, has reportedly came up in discussions. Doval also paid a courtesy call on President Mahinda Rajapaksa at the President's House in Colombo.

Sri Lanka's opposition parties sign MoU with common opposition candidate⁸⁷

Sri Lanka's opposition political parties and people's organisations signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the common opposition presidential candidate Maithripala Sirisena on December 1. Opposition party leaders and leaders of civil society groups under the patronage of Ven. Maduluwawe Sobhitha Thero signed the MoU expressing their support to work together with the common

candidate at the upcoming presidential polls at Vihara Maha Devi Open Air stadium. Among the signatories were former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaranatunga, opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe, Democratic Party leader Sarath Fonseka, and MP Arjuna Ranatunga. Major points of the MoU are abolishing the executive Presidency, changing the electoral system, amending the 18th Amendment to the Constitution and establishing the independent commissions introduced through the 17th Amendment to the Constitution.

19 candidates file nominations for Presidential election in January 2015⁸⁸

19 candidates, including President Mahinda Rajapaksa and common opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena, handed over their nomination papers to the Elections Commissioner on December 8 to contest the Presidential elections in 2015. Among the candidates contesting the election in January are 17 candidates from recognised political parties and two independent groups. Sarath Manamendra of Nawa Sihala Urumaya, a candidate who had come forward to contest the Presidential elections, has however decided to support President Mahinda Rajapaksa at the election. Manamendra had made the deposit for the election and had also submitted his nomination papers. Manamendra said that he had decided to support the President in the best interest of the Nation and in order to defeat attempts to divide the country.

More UPFA members and political parties extend support to Sirisena⁸⁹

Many Government members and Tamil and Muslim political parties extended their support to the common opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena for the presidential election on January 8. Minister of Industry and Commerce Rishad Bathiudeen and his political party, the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has decided to back Maithripala Sirisena at the Presidential election on January 8. The TNA said that it had offered unconditional support to Sirisena and had not signed an agreement. TNA Parliamentarian M.A Sumanthiran said that the TNA had also not discussed withdrawing troops from the North.

Election violence⁹⁰

An official election monitor in Sri Lanka, People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) says abuse of state resources for election purposes in 2015 presidential election has increased dramatically compared to the 2010 presidential election. A total of 150 violations relating to the abuse of state power, resources and misuse of state sector employees for election purposes have been reported to PAFFREL during the first 35 days of the pre-election period. In contrast, during the entirety of the 68 day pre-election period of the 2010 presidential election, only 53 incidents relating to the misuse of state resources for campaign purposes were recorded. The election monitor says the abuse of state resources for election purposes in this election is well organised and systematic with little or no regard for electoral laws.

Ban Ki Moon urges Sri Lankan government to conduct peaceful election⁹¹

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has conveyed his "strong expectation" that the government of Sri Lanka will ensure "the peaceful and

credible conduct" of its Presidential election. The UN said that in a phone call with G.L. Peiris, the Minister of External Affairs, Ban reaffirmed the UN's continuous support for reconciliation, political dialogue and accountability as the country heads towards the election on January 8, 2015. In his conversation with Peiris, the Secretary-General noted the importance of inclusive participation of all Sri Lankan voters, including minority communities, in the election process without any fear.

PAFFREL invites monitors from the Asian Election Monitoring Network⁹²

36 foreign election monitors from the Asian Election Monitoring Network arrived in Sri Lanka to observe the polls at the invitation of the PAFFREL. According to PAFFREL, a special training program was held on December 29 to give the foreign monitors an understanding of the proceedings in Sri Lanka. The Asian monitors were invited following discussions held with the Elections Commissioner. The Asian monitors will monitor the pre and post polls environment as well as the election itself.

Commonwealth monitors will observe the presidential elections⁹³

Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma called for a level playing field during the Presidential election in Sri Lanka, and adherence to the laws and norms that govern a credible and peaceful election. Sharma said that Dr. Bharrat Jagdeo, former President of Guyana, will lead a Commonwealth Observer Group to Sri Lanka, which follows a formal invitation from Sri Lanka's Commissioner of Elections, Mahinda Deshapriya. The nine Observers will be in Sri Lanka from January 2 to 14, 2015. A five-member team from the Commonwealth Secretariat, led by Katalaina Sapolu, Director of the Rule of Law Division, will support them. The full composition of the Commonwealth Observer Group is: Dr. Bharrat Jagdeo (Chair), Former President Guyana, Maria Chin Abdullah, The Coalition of Free and Fair Elections Malaysia, Dr. Campbell Gordon Calder, Former Member of Parliament New Zealand, Qamar Zaman Kaira, Former Minister and Member of Parliament Pakistan, Eldred De Klerk, Rule of law and elections security expert South Africa, Dr. Sally Kosgei, Former Minister and Member of Parliament Kenya, Sa-adatu Maida, Election Commissioner Ghana, Brij Bihari Tandon, Former Election Commissioner of India, and Lainy Malkani, Media Expert United Kingdom.

Sri Lanka welcomes EU Council decision to appeal judgment to annul ban on LTTE⁹⁴

Sri Lankan Government has welcomed the decision of the Council of the European Union to appeal the judgment of the General Court of the European Union of October 16, 2014, which annulled measures taken by the Council to designate the LTTE as a terrorist organisation and the freezing of LTTE funds.

President returns gold possessed by LTTE to rightful owners⁹⁵

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa returned another stock of gold possessed by the LTTE to the rightful owners at a function held at the Temple Trees on December 5. Nearly 2,000 rightful owners of the gold jewellery either confiscated by the LTTE or pawned to them by the owners during the LTTE's control of the

North were invited to attend the ceremony at the Temple Trees and receive their possessions from the President. According to the Defence and Urban Development Ministry Media Spokesman Brigadier Ruwan Wanigasooriya, President handed over 2,184 parcels of gold jewellery to 1,960 identified rightful owners in the North. The latest group of 1,960 identified owners came from Mannar (223), Vavuniya (319), Jaffna (45), Kilinochchi (1187) and Mullaitivu (186).

Sri Lanka signs agreement with Bangladesh to purchase rice⁹⁶

Sri Lanka signed an agreement with Bangladesh on December 3 in Dhaka to purchase 25,000 metric tonnes of rice from the country. Under the provisions of the contract, Sri Lanka agreed to purchase 25,000 metric tonnes of non-fragrant, par boiled, coarse rice from Bangladesh to overcome the rice shortage caused by the drought situation affecting the harvest in 2014 in Sri Lanka. This will be the first time in the history of Bangladesh that it has decided to export rice to any foreign country, Sri Lankan High Commission in Dhaka said. Nalin Fernando, the Chairman of Lanka Sathosa Ltd. and Sarwar Khan, the Director General of Food Directorate-Bangladesh signed the agreement on behalf of the two governments.

Indian Naval Ship 'Sukanya' visits Port of Colombo⁹⁷

The Indian Naval Ship 'Sukanya' arrived at the Port of Colombo for logistic support on December 9, 2014. It was welcomed by the Sri Lanka Navy in accordance with naval traditions on arrival. The ship's Commanding Officer Commander M.D. Dorai Babu called on the Deputy Area Commander of the Western Naval Area Commodore K.G. Paul of Sri Lanka Navy at the Western Naval Command Headquarters in Colombo. The ship stayed in Sri Lanka till December 12, 2014.

Russian naval ships visit port of Colombo⁹⁸

Sri Lanka Navy, in accordance with naval traditions, ceremonially welcomed two Russian naval ships belonging to the Black Sea Fleet, "Moskva" and "Cola", on December 19. The Mission Commander and the Moskva's Commanding officer accompanied by the Military Attaché of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Sri Lanka paid a courtesy call on the Commander Western Naval Area, Rear Admiral Dayananda Nanayakkara at the Command Headquarters in Colombo. The visiting Russian ships stayed in Sri Lanka till December 23, 2014.

Two Japanese naval ships visit port of Colombo⁹⁹

Accepting the invitation extended by the Sri Lanka Navy the two Japanese Defense Force ships Harusame DD-102 and Amagiri DD-154 arrived at the Port of Colombo on December 1, 2014 to participate in the 2014 Galle Dialogue International Maritime Security Conference.

A Japanese adviser to the Missing Persons Commission¹⁰⁰

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa has appointed a Japanese expert and a former international judge Motoo Noguchi as the sixth foreign adviser to the Missing Persons Commission. Noguchi is a former International Judge of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, and the Chair of the Board of Directors of the Trust Fund for Victims of the International Criminal Court.

President condemns terrorist attack in Peshawar¹⁰¹

President Mahinda Rajapaksa has condemned the terrorist attack in Peshawar, in which dozens of children were killed and many others were wounded. "Horrified to learn of the Peshawar terrorist attack. Targeting of children is most cowardice. Our thoughts & prayers are with Pakistan," the President tweeted.

Japan deports 26 Sri Lankans¹⁰²

Japan has deported 26 Sri Lankans including asylum seekers on December 18, after their applications for refugee status were rejected. Lawyers and activists have denounced the government's move which also deported six Vietnamese nationals as "inhumane". The immigrants' lobby group Provisional Release Association in Japan (PRAJ) has said that it is believed to be the first time the government has deported asylum seekers and visa over stayers using the same flight.

1.1 million people affected due to bad weather¹⁰³

According to the Disaster Management Center (DMC) of Sri Lanka, the severe weather continued to submerge most parts of the island's Northern, North Central, North Western and Eastern provinces. The highest number of deaths was reported in the central hill district of Badulla in Uva Province where landslides killed 16 people and five more are missing. Over 1.1 million people were affected by the heavy rains displacing over 110,000 people to shelters. According to the latest report released by the DMC, 117,623 people from 33,811 families are in 618 island wide shelters. A total of 1,106,380 people from 306,959 families are affected by the floods and landslides.

Sri Lanka welcomes 1.5 millionth tourist in 2014¹⁰⁴

For the first time in the history of Sri Lanka's tourism industry 1.5 million tourists have arrived in the island in the year 2014. Sri Lanka has set a target of 1.5 million tourists for 2014. It has earned US\$ 1.6 billion from tourism in the first nine months of 2014. Sri Lanka Tourism aims to attract 2.5 million tourists by the year 2016.

Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen held in the two countries released¹⁰⁵

Rameswaram fishermen had launched an indefinite strike along with Pudukkottai, Nagapattinam and Karaikal fishermen demanding the release of Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen held in the two countries. After the Tamil Nadu government had ordered the release of 30 Sri Lankan fishermen and the Sri Lankan government reciprocated the gesture by releasing 66 Tamil Nadu fishermen, ahead of Christmas, leaders of fishermen associations decided to end the strike.

Sri Lanka welcomes US-Cuba deal¹⁰⁶

Sri Lanka welcomed the announcements made by the leaders of the United States of America and Cuba, of a rapprochement between the two countries, thereby ending decades' long estrangement and paving the way for the renewal of diplomatic ties. The Sri Lankan External Affairs Ministry said that the release and exchange of prisoners is a concrete step towards a new era of US-Cuba relations which marks a turning point in the history of the two nations.

Sri Lanka shows improvement in Perception of Corruption this year¹⁰⁷

Sri Lanka has improved its ranking on the Transparency International's annual global Corruption Perception Index (CPI) released on December 3. Sri Lanka improved six notches in the CPI and ranked at the 85th place among 175 countries with a score of 38 points. In 2013 with a score of 37 points the island nation in South Asia ranked at the 91st place among 177 countries.

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