

SOUTH ASIA TRENDS

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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

One year after the end of the NATO combat mission, security situations in Afghanistan have deteriorated significantly. On the one hand Taliban has increased its offensive and seized many parts of the country, on the other, the Daesh or the IS is also increasing its foothold in Afghanistan. Increasing IS presence are also being reported in countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan. Large number of Maldivian youth have gone to Syria and joined the IS. There are also reports of Sri Lankan and Indian youth joining the IS. Even though the government of Bangladesh, Maldives and Pakistan have downplayed the IS threats in their respective countries, all these three countries have decided to join the Saudi-led anti-terror coalition to fight terrorism and extremist ideology. Afghanistan has also been invited to join the coalition, but it has not officially disclosed its decision yet. According to the Afghan ministry of foreign affairs, it is assessing the issue comprehensively.

There is no sign of improvement in Nepal's situations. Political stalemate still continues in Nepal. Both Madhes parties and the government representatives were in touch with New Delhi on the ongoing crisis in the country. India has welcomed Government of Nepal's three point decisions to address Madhesi demands. According to New Delhi, the decision will create the ground for resolution of the current impasse. However, the Madhesis have rejected the three point proposals, and decided to continue their protests.

In order to improve the Sri Lanka-US relations, several high level dignitaries from the USA visited Sri Lanka in the month of December. Given the increasing interactions between the US and Sri Lankan officials, some opposition leaders in Sri Lanka have termed the foreign policy of the current government as pro-US.

The most talked about event in the region in the month of December was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprise visit to Pakistan on his way back home from Kabul on December 25, 2015. International community has welcomed the visit saying that improved ties between the two countries will bring peace in the entire region. In India, however, there is a mixed response on the unscheduled visit.

2015 ended with some positive and some worrisome developments in the region. An attempt has been made in this issue of the South Asia Trends to outline all those developments.

Afghanistan

Prime Minister Modi visits Kabul¹

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made his first visit to Kabul on December 25, 2015. During the visit, Modi officially inaugurated Afghanistan's new parliament building. India funded the new building, which cost an estimated US\$90 million. Prime Minister Modi announced 500 scholarships for the children of members of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) who have lost their lives defending the country, in his speech during the inauguration ceremony of the new Afghan parliament building. Modi further added that a scheme consisting of scholarships for 1,000 others will also continue. A joint statement, released after a meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, said that the two sides "exchanged views on the security situation in Afghanistan, which faces serious challenges of terrorism, extremism and narcotics". Modi, meanwhile "reiterated India's full support to Afghanistan for strengthening its defensive capabilities for preserving Afghanistan's unity and territorial integrity and ensuring security". Modi thanked Afghan authorities for ensuring the safety of the Indian embassy in Kabul, the four consulates in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif, and Indian nationals in Afghanistan, including those working on various development projects. On the eve of Modi's official trip to Kabul, the Indian government announced the delivery of three Mi-25 attack helicopters to Afghanistan.

President Ghani makes four-nation visit through Europe²

Addressing a press conference in Kabul on December 7, after a four-nation visit through Europe that included France, Italy, Germany and Sweden, President Ashraf Ghani said a 10-year economic cooperation framework policy has been drawn up with European partners. Ghani's first stop was the UN climate change conference in Paris. From there he visited Italy, Germany and Sweden where he held talks with the countries' respective leaders. At the press conference he said he had expressed his sympathies with the French in the aftermath of the Paris attacks. The focus during his trip to Germany had been on security, he said. "German officials renewed their commitment to keep troops and will continue to help Afghan police," he said. Ghani also said that Germany has pledged to donate 330 million Euros to Afghanistan until 2020. In addition, he said he had asked the German government to help with the rebuilding of the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital in Kunduz following the deadly airstrike in October 2015. He said that both Sweden and Germany had pledged to help Afghanistan with its housing projects. Reporting back on his Italian leg of the trip, Ghani said Italy will keep 500 troops at Herat airport and that they had pledged 29 million Euros to reconstruct Herat airport. He said they will also help with the construction of the Herat-Chisht Road. Another issue raised with Italian officials was that of wind energy, he said. Swedish officials meanwhile have sealed a ten-year commitment to Afghanistan and pledged one billion euro over this period, he said.

President Ghani meets Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Paris³

Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed to jointly promote the Afghan peace process with "legitimate political actors" and take action against those who refuse to join the reconciliation process. The understanding was reached at a meeting between

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on the sideline of the Climate Change Conference in Paris on November 30, 2015.

President Ghani attends 'Heart of Asia' conference⁴

A key regional conference on Afghanistan was jointly inaugurated by Pakistani Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, in Islamabad on December 9, 2015. The 'Heart of Asia' conference began with an aim to intensify efforts for regional linkages and to promote peace and stability in war-torn Afghanistan. Ghani spoke at length about prospects and challenges Afghanistan faced in the conference. He said Afghanistan has come a long way in building close ties with all its neighbours. He highlighted that security was a threat but promised that "2016 will be better".

President Ghani meets Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj⁵

Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj called on President Ashraf Ghani and discussed connectivity, terror threats to the war-torn Afghanistan and the peace and reconciliation process. Swaraj, who was accompanied by Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar and India's envoys to Pakistan and Afghanistan, met Ghani for nearly 30 minutes on the sidelines of the 'Heart of Asia' Conference on December 9, during which they also talked about India's willingness to join Afghanistan-Pakistan trade and transit agreement. The two leaders also discussed developmental projects assisted by India in Afghanistan. Earlier, while speaking at the Heart of Asia Conference, Swaraj expressed India's willingness to help Afghanistan in shoring up its defence capability.

President Ghani attends the inauguration of the TAPI pipeline⁶

President Ghani made a two-day official visit to Turkmenistan to inaugurate the TAPI gas line project on December 13. The key gas line will export natural gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan on to Pakistan and India. During the visit, he spoke in the International Neutrality Conference in Ashgabat. During his speech, Ghani hailed the role of Turkmenistan for staying neutral and said that the country has proved to be a good neighbour of Afghanistan. He said that some neighbours have been exporting terrorism instead of increasing their assistance but Turkmenistan has extended its hand of cooperation. President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani said the pipeline project to pump natural gas from Turkmenistan to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan (TAPI) is not against the interests of neighbouring gas-rich Iran.

President Ghani visits Baku⁷

President Ashraf Ghani and his Azerbaijan counterpart Ilham Aliyev met on December 22, 2015 and discussed the development of bilateral relations between the two countries, during Ghani's visit to Baku. Ilham Aliyev said that Azerbaijan hopes to improve cooperation with Afghanistan in infrastructure, telecommunications and railway sectors and added that "we want to finalise the new Silk Road which will link Asia with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey to Europe." The Azerbaijan president assured Ghani that his country will try to attract more Afghan university students and also cooperate in various sectors including

civilian, police, security, natural disaster, diplomacy and energy. He also said that his country is ready to cooperate with Afghanistan in agriculture, natural resources and private sectors. In addition, the Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani reportedly signed agreements on employment opportunities and social protection with Salim Muslumov, Minister of Labour and Social Protection.

Ghani-Erdogan discuss Afghanistan, war on terror, bilateral ties⁸

President Ashraf Ghani has said that regional efforts must be stepped up to counter ongoing insurgency and terrorism in the region, after holding talks with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul on December 24, 2015. Turkish president Erdogan added that its troops will continue to stay in Afghanistan in a NATO-led mission. He added his country will continue to provide development assistance to Afghanistan. He urged the international community to stand with Afghanistan during its transformation, and provide support in terms of development and security. During the tour, Ghani called on Turkish investors to come forward and invest in Afghanistan, calling it an investment supporting country in the region.

Gen. Raheel Sharif meets Afghan leaders⁹

Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Gen. Raheel Sharif held talks with President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah on bilateral cooperation between the two countries, counter terrorism and peace in Afghanistan on December 27, during his visit to the country. Reportedly, the president and Sharif discussed three issues - Afghanistan-Pakistan security, peace talks and counter terrorism initiatives. Sharif's visit comes just days after Pakistan's national security advisor Sartaj Aziz reported that a four member commission comprising representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the U.S will be formed to facilitate the resumption of peace talks.

Saudi invites Kabul to join 34-state anti-terror coalition¹⁰

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Salahuddin Rabbani met with the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to Kabul Abdulrahman Al- Ghaseb where Afghanistan was officially invited to join the recently formed 34-state Islamic military coalition. In return, Rabbani said that the invitation to Afghanistan to join this coalition had been discussed in a recent telephone call between high-level authorities of Afghanistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In a statement issued by ministry of foreign affairs, Rabbani said: "Afghanistan will assess the issue comprehensively and adopt its decision in this regard in the near future."

Carter in Afghanistan, warns of IS threat¹¹

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter made a surprise visit to Afghanistan. Carter met troops at a U.S. base near the city of Jalalabad in Nangarhar Province, where about 600 U.S. troops are stationed. "We are seeing little nests of ISIL (Islamic State) spring up around the world, including here in Afghanistan ... but I will say that that is a threat that we track very closely," Carter told a news conference after meeting acting Afghan Defense Minister Masoom Stanekzai on December 18, 2015.

Chinese Premier calls for further economic and security ties with Afghanistan¹²

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang met with Afghanistan's CEO Abdullah Abdullah in Zhengzhou on December 15. China encourages companies to invest in Afghanistan's key projects and boost bilateral trade, Li told Abdullah, who is in the central Chinese city for a meeting of prime ministers from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states. The two countries can work with each other in transportation, water resources, renewable energy and human resources. Li also called on both countries to step up counter-terrorism and security cooperation. He said China supports Afghanistan's peace and reconciliation process, in which China can play a constructive role. Abdullah said China is always a trustworthy friend and partner of Afghanistan. China's policy of promoting peace and support for the reconstruction of Afghanistan is conducive to regional stability.

ADB grants \$1.2 billion to support energy security¹³

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved \$1.2 billion grants to reinforce ongoing energy projects in Afghanistan, provide new funds to boost supply and promote cross-border trade in energy. The grants include \$750 million from ADB's Special Funds resources, and up to \$450 million from the Afghanistan Infrastructure Trust Fund, which will be administered by the Manila-based bank. In a statement, ADB said the funds would be disbursed in multiple tranches, with the first amounting to \$275 million earmarked for release in 2015. The remaining tranches will follow through to 2025. In its first tranche, ADB will fund the last missing links for an expanded Turkmenistan-Afghanistan power interconnection, allowing the country to increase electricity imports for year-round supplies. This will include constructing over 300 km of a 500 kilovolt transmission line connecting Shiberghan to Dasht-i-Alwan, and over 60 km of a 220kV line from Andkhoy to Shiberghan. ADB will also provide support for developing a business plan and tariff framework for the state power utility, Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat.

Iran, Afghanistan to sign agreement on ICT¹⁴

Iranian Minister of Communications and Information Technology (CIT) Mahmoud Vaezi said on December 7, that Iran and Afghanistan are set to sign a cooperation document on Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Vaezi made the remarks after a meeting with the visiting Afghan Minister of Communications and Information Technology Abdul Razaq Wahidi.

Afghan, Indian officials mark 100-year anniversary of Govt-in-exile¹⁵

Afghan and Indian officials celebrated the 100-year anniversary of the establishment of a provisional government of India, which was a government-in-exile, in Kabul on December 1. The Provisional Government of India was established in Afghanistan on December 1, 1915 by Indian nationalists, during World War I. Its purpose was to enroll support from the Afghan Emir as well as Tsarist (and later Bolshevik) Russia, China, and Japan for the Indian Movement. The provisional government found significant support from the internal administration of the Afghan government, although the Emir refused to declare open support, and ultimately, under British pressure it was forced to withdraw from Afghanistan in 1919.

Afghan, Indonesian clerics meet in Kabul¹⁶

Religious leaders from Afghanistan and Indonesia came together on December 1 in Kabul where they strongly condemned terrorism and called for acceptance and moderation among Muslims. Delegates, attending the 2015 Annual Forum for Promoting Peace, Respect to Human Rights and Countering Radicalism, said Muslims should treat the followers of other religions as well as all Muslims with respect.

U.S. airstrikes aid Afghan forces¹⁷

Afghan forces backed by U.S. airstrikes pushed back a Taliban onslaught on December 24 in a strategically important district in Helmand province, officials said. Sangin district had been besieged by the insurgents for weeks before an uptick in the ferocity of the fight sparked concerns it could fall to Taliban control. But civilian and military officials said Sangin remained in government hands after the United States conducted two airstrikes overnight, and Afghan military helicopters dropped food and ammunition to soldiers and police who had been surrounded and trapped inside the district army base for days. The presence of a small contingent of British troops, who arrived in the Shorab base - formerly the United Kingdom's Camp Bastion during its Afghan combat mission - had helped boost morale of both civilians and security forces, officials said. As the military rushed more troops to the area, Afghan officials asked for the international military coalition's help, including airstrikes. Just before midnight, U.S. warplanes conducted two strikes in the vicinity of Sangin, said the spokesman for the NATO mission in Afghanistan, U.S. Army Col. Mike Lawhorn. Afghan planes also struck Taliban strongholds in Sangin, killing 25 insurgents and wounding another 12, said the Afghan army spokesman in Helmand, Guam Rasoul Zazai.

Afghanistan's old guard set up opposition party¹⁸

A group of Afghan warlords and lawmakers set up opposition party on December 18 in a bid to pressure the Kabul government to deliver on its economic and security promises. The new Afghanistan Protection and Stability Council (APSC) is "not an anti-government body" but is seeking "fundamental reforms to the way government operates," said Abdul Rasool Sayyaf, a leader of the newly-formed party and a former militia commander. Sayyaf said the council's first demand was for electoral reform. Sayyaf called on the government to "use the mujahedeen" in its battle against insurgents, referring to the former warlords and battlefield commanders who defeated the Soviet army in the 1980s, and then supported the 2001 U.S. invasion that toppled the Taliban.

UNAMA chief reports of increased security incidents¹⁹

Nicholas Haysom, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, delivered his three-monthly report to the United Nations Security Council on December 21 and said security developments combined with slow economic growth, growing political pressures and expression of public discontent underlined the challenges faced by the Afghan government. He said the temporary seizure by the Taliban of Kunduz city marked the increased intensity of the conflict, which in turn had a major impact on civilians. In addition, the deterioration of

security across the north dealt a major setback to government. In his report, Haysom said the overall level of security incidents in the country increased and intensified between August 1 and October 31, against the same period last year.

Afghan, NATO speak out on eve of drawdown anniversary²⁰

On the eve of the first anniversary of the end of the NATO combat mission in Afghanistan, US officials said that they are not happy with the current situation, arguing that the Taliban has gained ground in the country. US officials said the Taliban has seized many parts of Afghanistan in the past year – the most since their regime was toppled in 2001. In addition, officials said Afghan casualties among security force members have surged by 26 per cent in 2015. According to US officials, at least 7,000 Afghan security force members have been killed between January 2015 and the beginning of December. In addition 12,000 of them have been wounded in the war against insurgents. Afghan officials meanwhile expressed their concerns over an increasing threat from militants but said insurgents have not been able to reach their goals this past year. Afghan security officials also believe that the war on terror has become more complex and terrorists are better equipped than they were in the past. Meanwhile, a number of Afghan MPs criticised the United States' decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. The US and NATO mission in Afghanistan has been a complete failure, the Russian President's special envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, told TASS, in evaluating the effectiveness of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) there. According to the Washington Post, the Taliban now control, or at least have a sizable presence, in roughly 30 per cent of Afghanistan, the most since 2001. However, the Ministry of Defense (MoD) of Afghanistan rejects the report and said the Taliban is a threat to only a few parts of the country.

NATO pledges funding to ANSF until 2020²¹

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced on December 1 that the alliance would fund the Afghan National Security Forces to the tune of US\$4 billion annually until 2020. Speaking at the Foreign Ministers meeting in Brussels, Stoltenberg said their current commitment was until 2017 but the alliance has extended this through to 2020. NATO is also planning to keep about 12,000 troops in Afghanistan in 2016, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said, despite earlier plans to downsize the force. NATO had initially planned to have a smaller, civilian-led presence take over from its Resolute Support training and advisory mission. NATO currently has about 13,000 troops in Afghanistan.

Half million of Afghans suffer from war, natural disasters: Report²²

Based on the report released by the United Nations organisation 643,000 Afghans have suffered from war and Natural disaster in 2015. The report also indicated that the provided assistance were not enough for the effected people, where most of them are women and children. Officials in ministry of economy have declared the report published by the United Nations organisation full of concerns. According to report 140,000 Afghans have been displaced due to civil war in Afghanistan.

Bangladesh

200,000 Afghans register in 27 EU States: IOM²³

About 200,000 Afghan asylum-seekers were registered in 27 European member states from January to December of 2015, according to the International Organisation for Migration. The exodus comes in the aftermath of a rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan of tens of thousands of U.S.-NATO forces, which has left the war-ravaged country of about 30 million people with harsh security and economic challenges.

Asia's least developed country is Afghanistan: UN²⁴

The United Nation's Human Development Office has ranked Afghanistan as 171, out of 188 countries, in the human development index. The report has measured countries' development based on gender inequality, maternal mortality ratio, adolescent birth rate, share of seats in parliament, population with at least some secondary education and the labour force participation rate.

Dhaka signs \$12.65billion deal with Moscow²⁵

Bangladesh signed a \$12.65 billion contract with a Russian public company to construct Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant in Pabna that would generate 2,400 megawatts of electricity on December 25. Monirul Islam, chairman of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission, and Vladimir Savushkin, senior vice president of Atomstroyexport, a subsidiary of the Russian state-run nuclear power company Rosatom, inked the contract. Of the contract amount, \$11.39 billion would come from a Russian line of credit, and the rest from the Bangladesh Government. Speaking at the programme, Finance Minister AMA Muhith said the government would take all precautionary measures to make sure that there was no hazard to public safety. The plant's nuclear waste will be taken back by Russia for safety, he added. The economic life of the two-unit plant has been estimated at 50 years. However, Rosatom said the plant would last for 60 years, three times higher than the coal- and gas-fired plants. The provisional takeover of the plant's first unit is expected in October, 2023, and the second one in October, 2024. The final takeover would be in October, 2024, and October, 2025.

Bangladesh gets 5 Russian choppers²⁶

Bangladesh's defence ministry has received five Mi-171Sh helicopters under a state credit contract of late 2013 from Russian Helicopters, a part of State Corporation Rostec, for use in UN humanitarian missions, transport, border security. They are designed to combat armoured ground, surface, immobile and mobile small targets, carry out search and rescue operations, and transport up to 37 paratroopers, 4,000 kilogrammes of cargo and 12 injured persons on stretchers.

Probe into 195 Pak POWs' role in good time²⁷

The investigation agency of the International Crimes Tribunal said on December 27 that it would start probe against the 195 Pakistani prisoners of war (POW) whenever it would find "suitable environment" and "directive from higher authorities". Agency's Coordinator Abdul Hannan Khan, however, said as the matter is involved with another country—Pakistan—they need to get government' directives before starting investigation. After the independence, Bangladesh had

collected specific evidence of genocide against the 195 Pakistani soldiers and they were in Indian custody as prisoners of war. After a long-drawn stressful negotiation over the POWs, Bangladesh finally signed a tripartite agreement in Delhi in April, 1974 in which Bangladesh said “having regard to the appeal of the Prime Minister of Pakistan to the people of Bangladesh to forgive and forget the mistakes of the past,” and Bangladesh decided not to proceed with the trials as an act of clemency. However, legal experts said there is no legal bar to try the 195 POWs and there has been a long standing demand to try them at the International Crimes Tribunal, which are now dealing the trial of Bangladeshi perpetrators who committed crimes in 1971. The demand of 195 POWs’ trial is getting louder after Pakistan recently denied committing any war crimes in 1971.

Pakistan withdraws diplomat accused of aiding militants²⁸

The second secretary (political) at Pakistan high commission in Dhaka was withdrawn by Pakistan on December 23 following allegations of aiding militants in Bangladesh. Pakistan withdrew the diplomat after an arrested militant confessed his link with her before a Dhaka court. Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh operative Idris Sheikh was arrested on November 29 in Dhaka and he made the confessional statement on December 6. Following this, Islamabad summoned the Bangladesh high commissioner on December 24 twice to lodge protest against the recent “treatment meted out to its envoy” in Dhaka. A press release on the website of Pakistan foreign ministry said, “Miss Farina Arshad, second secretary at Pakistan high commission in Dhaka, was constantly being harassed by the Bangladeshi authorities.” “Lately, an incessant and orchestrated media campaign was launched against her on spurious charges linking her with so called terrorists. Our high commission in Dhaka issued a strong rebuttal against the baseless and fabricated charges against the diplomat. “Following this protest, it was decided to withdraw her. She has since returned back,” the press release said.

US reaffirms commitment to help Bangladesh on Rohingya issues²⁹

US ambassador in Dhaka Marcia Bernicat reiterated on December 22, her country’s commitment to help Bangladesh, Myanmar and countries across the region find just and durable solutions for Rohingya refugees. The US ambassador traveled to Cox’s Bazar and met district and local officials, undocumented Rohingya, registered Rohingya refugees, and organisations providing humanitarian assistance in the area during her two-day visit. She also visited two USAID-funded projects and a project that supports the government of Bangladesh’s National Plan of Action on Combating Human Trafficking that includes raising public awareness, supporting outbound migrant workers, training police, and providing shelter and support to victims.

India, Bangladesh begin land survey³⁰

Bangladesh and India have started demarcating the land in “adverse possessions” (AP) and raising pillars on the international border in Jalpaiguri district of north Bengal. The process will put an end to a humanitarian crisis triggered in 1947 following the erroneous omission of a police station in Jalpaiguri district by British lawyer Cyril John Radcliffe, while dividing the country. In June, Bangladesh and

India agreed to put an end to the dispute on the basis of 2011 Protocol. The Protocol identified the disputed areas and the 2015 agreement agreed to complete the “ground demarcation” of the boundary in 2016. The Survey of India officers, headed by senior officer Biswanath Chakravarty, reached the village with border guards of both countries and initiated the process. Reportedly, “110 subsidiary pillars and 10 main pillars” will be constructed on the Berubari border. Pillars will be raised in five villages under South Berubari gram panchayat and in another adjacent Panchayat, Nagar Berubari, on the international border.

Six wounded in blasts at mosque in Bangladesh naval base³¹

At least six naval personnel were seriously wounded in explosions at the end of prayers on December 18 at a mosque inside a Bangladesh naval base in Chittagong. Two people were arrested in connection with the blasts. Police said they had confessed to being members of banned militant group Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh. Security forces also deactivated five unexploded bombs from the mosque in the port city of Chittagong, some 265 km (165 miles) southeast of Dhaka. It is the first time a mosque used by Bangladesh’s Sunni Muslim majority has been attacked.

Attack in an Ahmadiyya mosque³²

Three people were injured during Jumma prayers in a suicide bomber attack inside an Ahmadiyya mosque in Rajshahi. While the investigators point finger at the outlawed Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) for the attack, US-based SITE Intelligence Group has reported that the Islamic State militants have claimed responsibility for it.

Municipal elections in Bangladesh³³

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has rejected the results of municipal polls held on December 30, 2015, alleging widespread vote-rigging, ballot-stuffing and capture of more than a thousand polling stations by the ruling party men. The Election Commission and the ruling Awami League (AL) however, claimed that the municipal polls were free and fair except for some stray incidents. The AL, however, accused the police of causing some of the incidents.

Foreign Minister Mahmood Ali visits Bahrain³⁴

Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali left Dhaka on December 21 for a three day official visit to Bahrain at the invitation of his counterpart Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa.

India’s LIC gets licence to operate in Bangladesh³⁵

Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) received licence from the Insurance Development and Regulatory Authority on December 20, to run its operation in Bangladesh. It is the first time a foreign company has been given licence to carry out life insurance business in Bangladesh. LIC Bangladesh will have a Tk 100 crore paid-up capital, with half joint venture’s ownership residing with LIC India. The remaining 40 per cent shares worth Tk 40 crore will be raised from Bangladesh’s capital market.

Exports accelerate to three-month high³⁶

Exports grew 13.63 per cent year-on-year in November, the highest in three months, riding on the sales of apparel items. Bangladesh raked in \$2.75 billion in export earnings in November 2015, which is 16.7 per cent higher than the target for the month, according to data from Export Promotion Bureau. The amount is also an improvement from the previous month, when \$2.37 billion was received. Of the receipts in November, garment exports alone accounted for \$2.22 billion, up 23.3 per cent from the previous month and 14.43 per cent from a year earlier. But receipts from almost all other major export items, including leather, dropped in November.

Money laundering from Bangladesh hits decade high³⁷

Illegal capital flight from Bangladesh surged 33.78 per cent year-on-year to \$9.66 billion in 2013 through trade misinvoicing and other channels, according to a report of Global Financial Integrity (GFI). The highest in a decade, the amount was more than six per cent of the country's GDP and one-third of the export receipts in 2013. It is three times the size of average foreign aid Bangladesh received in recent times. Of the amount, \$8.35 billion or over 86 per cent was siphoned off through trade misinvoicing while the rest \$1.31 billion could not be traced in the balance of payments data. The illegal outflow stood at \$7.23 billion in 2012, according to a revised estimate of the GFI report. The Washington-based research and advisory organisation published the report titled "Illegal Financial Flows from Developing Countries: 2004-2013" on December 9. On average, \$5.59 billion was siphoned out of Bangladesh a year between 2004 and 2013.

Director general of Indian Coast Guard visits Chittagong³⁸

Director General (DG) of Indian Coast Guard Vice Admiral HCS Bisht, AVSM called on Zonal Commander of Bangladesh Coast Guard (east zone) Captain M. Shahidul Islam at the latter's office in Chittagong on December 10. During the visit, he praised Bangladesh Coast Guard for playing an effective role in resisting smuggling and human trafficking through the sea route and sought cooperation from Bangladesh to prevent such kind of criminal activities.

US Department of State delegation visits Bangladesh³⁹

An US delegation led by Counsellor of the US Department of State Ambassador Thomas Shannon visited Dhaka on December 13 on a one-and-a-half day visit. Shannon was accompanied by US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Desai Biswal, and Deputy Assistant Secretary for South Asia Manpreet Singh Anand. During the visit, the delegation met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, her International Affairs Adviser Dr. Gowher Rizvi, and Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali and Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque. Security, trade, development and countering extremism dominated the talks. Shannon also addressed a seminar on "The US-Bangladesh Relationship: Working Together on Global Issue" organised by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies.

Bangladesh to join Saudi-led anti-terror centre⁴⁰

Bangladesh has decided to join a Saudi Arabian initiative to set up “Counter-Terrorism Centre” along with other Muslim countries to fight terrorism and extremist ideology. “We have preliminarily consented to join the centre and asked for details of the proposed platform. The Saudi Government has agreed to send us further information on it,” State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam told *The Daily Star* on December 15. He said the issue was at a very early stage. “We need to discuss any initiative widely before joining it. It can be discussed even in parliament.” Elaborating the Saudi move, Shahriar Alam said Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz has taken an initiative to establish a centre in Riyadh to coordinate efforts against terrorism and extremism. In this regard, he said Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir recently phoned Bangladesh Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali and made a request to join the centre as a founding member. The state minister said Bangladesh decided to join the centre along with other Muslim countries in line with the “zero tolerance” policy of the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina against terrorism and violent extremism.

India starts installing 70,000 cooking stoves in Bangladesh⁴¹

India has begun installation of 70,000 improved cooking stoves in eight upazilas of Bangladesh to help capacity building and adaptation in response to the challenge of climate change. Indian High Commissioner Pankaj Saran and Bangladesh’s Environment Ministry Secretary Kamal Uddin Ahmed inaugurated the project, funded by the India Endowment for Climate Change at a cost of Rs. 5 crore on December 14. The two countries signed a memorandum of understanding during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh on June 6-7 in this regard.

India keen to invest in the proposed Payra seaport⁴²

India has offered to invest in the proposed Payra seaport on a government-to-government basis, in a move to further deepen ties between the two countries. The proposal was made at the shipping secretary-level meeting between the two countries that was held in New Delhi in November 2015.

Bangladesh offers transit facilities to Nepal⁴³

Bangladesh has offered transit facility to Nepal for importing petroleum products from third nations against the backdrop of acute fuel crisis in the country. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina offered transit facility through Saidpur airport, Chittagong and Mongla ports for transportation of goods to Nepal when outgoing Nepalese Ambassador Hari Kumar Shrestha called on her on November 29. Bangladesh Ambassador to Nepal Mashfee Binte while speaking at an interaction organised by Reporters Club Nepal on November 30, 2015 said that Bangladesh Government is ready to allow Nepal to use Mongla and Chittagong ports for import of fuel and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). Nepal, however, has shown interest in importing aviation turbine fuel from Bangladesh, according to diplomatic sources.

Bhutan

EU recognises Bhutan's leadership in climate change efforts⁴⁴

The European Union (EU) has recognised Bhutan's leadership role and the "extraordinary ambition" in addressing climate change efforts with a signing of the "Declaration European Union" for cooperation in Climate Action and Energy" in L"e Bourget, Paris on December 10, 2015. A press release from the Bhutan Embassy in Brussels states, the declaration recognises Bhutan's unique situation as a land-locked and least developed country with a fragile mountainous environment. Agriculture and Forests Minister Yeshey Dorji and EU Commissioner Miguel Arias Canete EU Commissioner signed the declaration on the sidelines of the UNFCCC COP21. The declaration calls on the international community to support Bhutan's efforts, as described in its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs). The EU is one of Bhutan's close development partners and has committed € 42 million for the period 2014-2020. More specifically, the EU supports Bhutan in enhancing the resilience of rural households to the effects of climate change, as well as the sustainability of renewable natural resources through the Global Climate Change Alliance.

World Bank gives US\$ 3.8 million as climate aid⁴⁵

The World Bank will pump in another US\$ 3.8 million to help the country combat climate change and prevent natural disasters. The Bank's vice president for South Asia, Annette Dixon announced the decision during her first visit to Bhutan on December 4. The support is for a new weather and disaster improvement project. This would strengthen weather forecasting and natural disaster early warning system. It also includes a grant to develop a climate resilience strategy, which is expected to pave way for additional international financing from other multilateral development banks.

Bhutan commended for ratifying UN Convention against Corruption⁴⁶

The UN Deputy Resident Representative Niamh Collier-Smith lauded Bhutan's ratification of the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) in Thimphu on December 9, 2015 at a function organised to mark the International Anti-Corruption Day. "This is a milestone to ensure that Bhutan's anti-corruption legal frameworks are in line with international good practice." She said Bhutan is making steady progress in the Transparency International's corruption perception index (CPI). Since Bhutan's inclusion, Bhutan's ranking has improved from 49th in 2009 to 30th least corrupt countries in 2014 out of 177 countries. In the Asia-Pacific, she said, Bhutan is the 6th least corrupt country. Bhutan Transparency Initiative also organised a debate to create awareness on corruption.

India releases Nu 960.275 million⁴⁷

The Government of India released Nu 960.275 million for the Project Tied Assistance (PTA) Projects and Program Grant on December 7, a press release from the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) states. Deputy Chief of Mission Bishwadip Dey of Embassy of India, Thimphu handed over a cheque of Nu 535.275 for PTA projects and Nu 425 million for Program Grant to the GNHC Secretary Sonam Wangchuk. The Government of India has committed Nu 45,000 million in the 11th Plan to Bhutan. It has committed Nu 28,000 million for PTA, Nu 8,500

million for Program Grant and Nu 8,500 million for Small Development Projects (SDP). To date, the Government of India has released Nu 9,109.638 million for PTA projects, Nu 4,250 million for Program Grant and Nu 1,780.655 million for SDP. In total, the Government of India has released Nu 15,140.293 million.

Bhutan's gender disparity one of worst in South Asia⁴⁸

Although Bhutan has moved two places up in the recently released Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) 2015, its gender-based disparities are one of the worst in South Asia. Bhutan is ranked 118, only ahead of Pakistan in the region, which is ranked 144 out of 145 countries. The index assesses the countries across four pillars – health, education, economic opportunities and political empowerment. Bhutan made improvement in educational attainment, which has been boosted by an enrolment in tertiary education. Girls make up 44 per cent of the total enrolment at the tertiary level in Bhutan. The country's score in health and survival, and political empowerment, however, remained the same. Among the 145 countries, Bhutan stands at 121 in education, two places up from 123 last year. However, Bhutan has slipped two places down in politics – 130 in 2014 to 132 in 2015 ranking. There are only six female parliamentarians in the 72-member Parliament – four in the National Assembly and two in the national Council. In the local government, 93 per cent of the elected leaders are male and only seven per cent female.

Bhutan ranks 132 on HDI⁴⁹

Bhutan's ranking in human development index (HDI) is up by four places at 132 out of 187 countries, according to the human development report, 2015, which was released on December 15. The human development index value for Bhutan is 0.605, which places the country in the medium development category along with India and Bangladesh from South Asia and 39 other countries. According to the report, life expectancy at birth for Bhutan is 69.5 years, expected year of schooling is 12.6 years and the gross national income per capita is US\$ 7,176.

America congratulates Bhutan on its National Day⁵⁰

On behalf of President Barack Obama and the people of the United States of America, the Secretary of State, John Kerry, congratulated Bhutan on its 108th National Day celebrations on December 17.

Chiphen Rigpel project impacted more than 200,000 Bhutanese⁵¹

It is estimated that at least 200,000 Bhutanese were impacted by the Indian government assisted Chiphen Rigpel project that officially ended on December 23. Begun in April 2010 with an ambitious goal to transform Bhutanese society into an IT enabled knowledge based one in five years, more than 125,000 Bhutanese including students, teachers, monks, and civil servants, among others, had directly been trained through the project till date. It is also estimated by NIIT that more than 30 per cent of the Bhutanese population was impacted by the project. Chiphen Rigpel had six components that included enabling e-governance, empowering teachers and taking ICT to schools, enabling employability, furnishing tertiary institutes with ICT training centres, reaching the unreached, and e-waste management. In all the six components, targets were either met or exceeded. The

Indian government chose multinational company NIIT to carry out the project. The project set up 168 computer labs in schools nationwide and over 100,000 students attended IT classes in the past five years. The Indian government funded Chiphen Rigpel at a cost of Nu 2.05 billion. Information and communications minister, D.N. Dhungyel, thanked the Indian government for its support.

Bhutan to remain a priority: JICA⁵²

While the KR-II grant assistance under which Bhutan received hundreds of power tillers in the past three decades ended earlier this year, Japan will continue to treat Bhutan as a top priority in its list of countries requiring support. This was reiterated by the new Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) President, Shinichi Kitaoka, during his first visit to the country. The president said that Bhutan had made good economic development progress which means it will graduate out of the lowest levels of assistance. He added that Japan had many other tools of assistance like grants, loans and technical assistance through which it would continue to support Bhutan. During his visit to Bhutan, the JICA president also received audiences with His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo and His Majesty The King.

Japan to help fulfil farm road targets⁵³

The Government of Japan will grant machineries by June 2017 to help the government to accomplish the farm road construction targets of the 11th Plan. Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) will supply at least 30 excavators, 20 backhoe machines and two trailers with other accessories in the third phase of the Japanese Grant aid project for improvement of machinery and equipment for construction of rural agricultural roads. The delegates from JICA, Gross National Happiness Commission and agriculture department signed the minutes of discussions on the preparatory survey for the project in presence of the agriculture minister Yeshey Dorji in Thimphu on December 16. Following the request from the government during the ninth bilateral annual consultation with Japan in 2014, the Japan government entrusted the preparatory survey to JICA. Based on the discussions and field survey conducted in last August and September in the country and verifying the basis and technical needs of the project, JICA prepared a Draft Preparatory Survey Report. The draft report signed on December 16 includes provisional project cost estimates, Japanese grant scheme, project implementation schedule, expected outcomes and indicators among others. The project would be submitted to the Japanese Cabinet in February 2016 for approval.

New Austrian resident representative looks to expand links⁵⁴

Austria will continue to support Bhutan in the 11th Plan, according to the new resident representative of the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC). The budget for the period 2014-2018 is likely to be Euro 10 million, according to Bhutan Country Strategy 2015-2018. Resident Representative Johannes Binder said ADC will maintain cooperation in energy, tourism and governance. The indicative budget of assistance for development of the energy sector is Euro 4.5 million, Euro 2.5 million in tourism, and Euro 3 million in governance. The amounts include spillovers from the 10th Plan. In the energy sector, Binder said the ADC will provide financial

and technical support for electrification in Bhutan. The ADC has already connected 2,700 rural households in Bhutan. He said the Austrian government will also train Bhutanese engineers in safety and maintenance of hydro power plants through a collaboration between Austrian and Bhutanese technicians. Currently, his office is helping the Druk Green Power Corporation (DGPC) in monitoring and management of geological disturbances to ensure that catastrophic accidents are prevented. The ADC in collaboration with the Swiss Development Corporation will help construct two district courts in Punakha and Wangdue. He said the construction of the two courts will be completed by February 2017.

Maldives

Maldives becomes first signatory to International Solar Alliance⁵⁵

Maldives has become the first country to sign the International Solar Alliance (ISA), launched by Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi and President of France Francois Hollande. The agreement was signed on behalf of the Maldivian government by Minister of State for Environment and Energy Abdulla Majeed, on the sidelines of the 21st session of Conference of the Parties (COP21) in Paris.

China provides free aid to renovate the Islamic Center⁵⁶

The Chinese Government has provided free aid to renovate the Islamic Center in Maldives with marble flooring to accommodate as many people as possible in prayer. China provided US\$ 1.14 million in free aid for the project. The cheque for free aid was presented by the Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives Wang Fukang to the Housing Minister Dr. Mohamed Muizzu at a special ceremony held at the housing ministry.

Dunya Maumoon meets Sri Lankan prime minister in Colombo⁵⁷

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Maldives Dunya Maumoon met with Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Ranil Wickremesinghe in Colombo. Discussions at the meeting were focused on strengthening bilateral relations. Earlier, Minister Dunya Maumoon urged not to allow any third country influence the relations between Maldives and Sri Lanka. She said that there have been reports in the Maldives media that some countries were applying pressure on the Sri Lankan government to publicly express concerns about the Maldives.

Amb. Shahare expresses India's interest in further contributing to Maldives' development⁵⁸

High Commissioner of India to the Maldives Rajeev Shahare has expressed India's keen interest in further contributing to the development of Maldives. Shahare made this remark during a courtesy call on President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom at the President's Office on December 8. Speaking at the meeting, President Yameen noted that 2015 would mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Maldives and India. He expressed gratitude to the Indian government for its continuous support to the Maldives in the international arena and in all areas of development, and reassured the Maldives' commitment to strengthening India-Maldives relations.

A peaceful region is integral to ensure peaceful nations: President⁵⁹

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom has called on South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries to prioritise improving relations with its neighbours, and said that a peaceful region is integral to ensure peaceful nations. This came in the President's message on the occasion of SAARC Charter Day. President Yameen also reaffirmed the Maldives' commitment to the SAARC ideals and pledged to foster greater regional cooperation for the advancement of South Asia, and called on SAARC countries to put aside their differences and work together to realise their common goal for a better and more prosperous future.

Nasheed's case appealed at Supreme Court⁶⁰

The case of the former President Mohamed Nasheed who has been convicted of terrorism and sentenced to 13 years in prison has been appealed at the Supreme Court. Talking to the press after presenting their appeal, the former President's lawyer, Hisaan Hussain said that he hopes that President Nasheed would get justice through the legal system as President Yamin has said before. Lawyer Hisaan said that President Nasheed's incarceration is attracting immense pressure towards the Maldives from the international community and all the people of the country wants the former president to be set free. Points presented at the appeal include: retracting the terrorism charges against President Nasheed; overrule the sentence against President Nasheed by the Criminal Court; if the Supreme Court deems the arrest of Judge Abdulla a crime, press charges under the new penal code; after presenting the appeal at the court on December 20, lawyer Hisaan requested that President Nasheed be transferred to house arrest. He said that it is something the former president wishes. Government of Maldives has welcomed decision of former Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed to appeal his 13-year jail sentence. Statement released by Foreign Ministry on December 13 said that government had always maintained that it was to the relevant judicial body that Nasheed needed to send his complaints to and that government had always maintained it was Supreme Court that needed to consider advice of United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. The Foreign Ministry said that Maldivian judiciary remained free of any influence.

EU Parliament passes resolution against Maldives⁶¹

European Parliament has passed a resolution calling to release former President Mohamed Nasheed, former Vice-President Ahmed Adeb, former defence ministers Tholhath Ibrahim and Mohamed Nazim, Sheikh Imran Abdulla, and other political prisoners. European Parliament said on its website that members expressed deep concern about the gradual deterioration of democratic standards and increasingly authoritarian tendencies in the Maldives. Members also called on the EU Commission and member states "to issue comprehensive warnings about the Maldives' human rights record to tourists planning to go to the country" and asked the European External Action Service to monitor closely the human rights and political situation in the Maldives. The resolution was passed by 563 votes to 31, with 32 abstentions. Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon has said that the resolution at the EU parliament calling to seize the cargo of Maldivian businessmen close to the Maldivian Government may diminish the relationship between the Maldives

and EU. Foreign Minister Dunya expressed concerns about the resolution on behalf of the government.

Maldivian forces would be active in Saudi led anti-terrorism coalition: Defence minister⁶²

Defence Minister Adam Shareef has said that the Maldivian armed forces would be actively taking part in the Saudi led anti-terrorism coalition. In an interview to the state media PSM on December 16, Minister Shareef said that the government's decision to take part in the coalition of Islamic countries shows the government's work to protect the faith. He said that being accepted into a league of Arab countries shows the trust in the Maldives by the Islamic countries. The Minister said that the Maldivian forces would be taking part in three ways in the coalition army including sharing the intelligence with the nations and actively on the field.

BML launches MVR 500 million "Green Fund"⁶³

Bank of Maldives (BML) has launched a MVR 500 million "Green Fund" to encourage individuals and businesses to invest in renewable energy, leading to low emission development in the Maldives. The bank said that the purpose of the concessional loan finance scheme, which has been endorsed by Ministry of Environment and Energy, was to encourage investment in environment-friendly green technologies. Minister of Environment and Energy Thorig Ibrahim said that BML's initiative would bolster Maldives' international leadership, as the Chair of Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), to mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change, and assist Maldives in its efforts to meet emission reduction targets and promote clean energy.

Tourist arrivals exceed 1.1 million by end November 2015⁶⁴

Ministry of Tourism has announced that tourist arrivals for 2015 had reached 1.1 million by the end of November 2015. This constitutes an increase of 1.3 per cent compared to the corresponding period in 2014. Tourist arrivals in November 2015 stood at 90,218 - an increase of 0.5 per cent compared to November 2014. Most tourists came from Asia Pacific region. The second best market for this period was Europe, and the third best market was United States. Country-wise, most arrivals were from China, second most arrivals were from Germany, third most arrivals were from UK, fourth most arrivals were from Italy, and fifth most arrivals were from India.

Eight political parties disbanded due to lack of members⁶⁵

Eight political parties have been disbanded after failing to raise their membership to 3000 by the end of the deadline. The political parties that were disbanded are Islamic Democratic Party, Social Democratic Party, Social Liberal Party, People's Party, Maldivian National Congress, People's Alliance, Maldivian Labour Party and the Maldivian National Party. A three month notice was given to the political parties to increase their membership to 3000 on September 6, after the amendment brought to the Law of Political Parties in August. There are 14 political parties registered in the Maldives. The amendment to the law says that the state would issue funding to political parties with at least 10,000 members.

Chinese companies invited to the Maldivian market⁶⁶

State Minister of the Finance Ministry, Mohamed Ashmalee has said that the Chinese companies are welcome to join the Maldivian market like Samsung and Apple. Speaking at the World Internet Conference (Wuzhen Summit), State Minister Ashmalee said that the Maldives is an independent country with an independent culture and heritage but many believe that the country cannot do enough to develop the international economy since the Maldives is a small country. Noting that a country still requires development in a lot of sectors, State Minister Ashmalee said that the Maldives need help from Microsoft, Google and the Chinese companies.

Former President Maumoon meets Sri Lankan leaders⁶⁷

Former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom met with the Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena and the Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe at the Sri Lankan Parliament Complex on December 20. At the meeting, former President Maumoon invited the Sri Lankan Prime Minister to the organising committee of the Islam and Democracy in South Asia conference in Sri Lanka in 2016 and take part in the event and give a speech. Former President Maumoon made the Sri Lankan leaders while visiting Sri Lanka on a family visit.

Maldives begins free trade agreement discussions with China⁶⁸

Discussions related to the establishment of a free trade agreement between China and Maldives began on December 21 at Bandos Island Resort in the Maldives. The two-day deliberations were attended by Minister of Economic Development Mohamed Saeed, and senior officials of the Maldivian government and the Embassy of China in the Maldives. The documents related to the discussions on this agreement were signed in September 2015. Speaking at the signing ceremony, Saeed said this was the first time in the history of the Maldives that the government was engaged in free trade agreement discussions with another country.

New military helicopter being brought to the Maldives⁶⁹

The government of Maldives has decided to bring another military helicopter to the Maldives. Defence Minister Adam Shareef told Media that the second helicopter is being brought with the help of the Indian government. He said that the first military helicopter was also donated by India. The Defence Minister said that the military of the two countries have held discussions on the matter; and if things proceed as decided, the helicopter would be brought to the country within the next three months. Minister Shareef said that MNDF wants to monitor the Maldivian ocean and the economic border on helicopters and regular flights. He said that the helicopters would be used in providing aid to the people in medical emergencies as well.

Challenges remain for Maldives in eliminating human trafficking: Dunya⁷⁰

Minister of Foreign Affairs Dunya Maumoon has said that Maldives still faces a multitude of challenges in eliminating human trafficking. Dunya made this remark at a ceremony at ministry of foreign affairs on December 28, 2015, for the signing of the instrument of accession to the 'Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish

Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children', supplementing the United Nations Conventions against Transnational Organised Crime. She said that the Maldives' accession to the protocol reflects "the government's on-going efforts to curb and stamp out offences related to trafficking throughout the country and towards the promotion and protection of the rights of those vulnerable to trafficking including the migrant workers." She added that being a small island developing state with limited means, Maldives needs to develop and strengthen efforts in identifying potential victims of human trafficking.

Agreement signed with China Exim Bank for \$373 million loan for runway project⁷¹

The Government of the Maldives has signed an agreement with the Exim Bank of China for a loan worth \$373 million for the construction of a new runway, as part of the Ibrahim Nasir International Airport (INIA) development project. This has been confirmed by Minister of Tourism Moosa Zameer. In addition to the new runway, the loan money will also go to the construction of a fuel farm and cargo complex at the airport. Zameer was accompanied in the meeting by Maldivian Ambassador to China Mohamed Faisal, Managing Director of Maldives Airports Authority Limited (MAACL) Adil Moosa, Minister of State for Finance Ahmed Munawwar, and Deputy Attorney General Ahmed Husham.

"India our closest partner in diplomatic, political relations": President⁷²

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom has said that India has been the Maldives' closest partner in terms of diplomatic and political relations. The President made this remark at a farewell call by Indian High Commissioner to the Maldives, Rajeev Shahare, at the President's Office on December 28, 2015. President Yameen expressed his gratitude to Shahare for his contributions during his time in office, towards strengthening and expansion of bilateral relationship between both countries. The president and the high commissioner highlighted areas to be further addressed in order to enhance the good working relationship between the Maldives and India, and discussed supporting each other in the international arena and in times of political distress. The President was accompanied at the meeting by Minister of Foreign Affairs Dunya Maumoon and Under Secretary at the President's Office Mohamed Naseer.

President inaugurates the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge⁷³

The agreement for the construction of the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge to be built between Malé and Hulhulé has been signed and the project has been inaugurated. At the special function held at Dhraubaaruge on December 30, Housing Minister Dr. Mohamed Muizzu signed the agreement on behalf of the Maldivian Government and the contractor China Communication and Construction Company (CCCC) was represented by the President of the company, Chen Gong. The construction of the project was inaugurated by the President Abdulla Yamin Abdul Gayoom and the Deputy Minister of Commerce of China, Gao Yan, who was appointed to attend the ceremony as a special envoy of the President of China, Xi Jinping. The government has said that the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge would be 1.39 kilometers long and 20 meters wide with two

Nepal

lanes for four-wheel vehicles and two lanes for motorcycles along with a separate lane for bicycles and one for pedestrians on foot. CCCC said that the bridge connecting the two islands across the sea would have a life span of 100 years.

Tenth meeting of Nepal-India JCIFM held⁷⁴

The tenth meeting of Nepal-India Joint Committee on Inundation and Flood Management (JCIFM) was held from December 6-10, 2015. At the meeting, India expressed its commitment to continue working closely with Nepal for further strengthening its cooperation in all the areas of mutual interest, including in the area of water resources, and would extend assistance for river training and embankment construction on other major rivers. The Nepali delegation was led by Director General of the Department of Water Induced Disaster Prevention (DWIDP) Niranjana Dev Pandey, while the Indian delegation was led by Gorakh Thakur, Member (Coordination), Ganga Flood Control Commission (GFCC). The committee visited the West Rapti River on December 7-8, 2015, as proposed by the Nepali side, but could not visit to Bagmati, Lalbakeya and Kamala rivers.

Deputy Prime Minister Thapa visits Delhi⁷⁵

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Kamal Thapa, during his visit to New Delhi, met Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj on December 2. During the meeting, Swaraj reiterated the need to seek an urgent political solution to problems facing Nepal, according to Indian Ministry of External Affairs Spokesperson Vikas Swarup.

Top leaders of the Samyukta Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha visits Delhi⁷⁶

India has urged top leaders of the Samyukta Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha (SLMM) who were on a Delhi visit to move forward on a "roadmap with specific action plan" to resolve the prolonged Tarai crisis. Organising a dinner meeting at the Hyderabad House on December 6, Indian Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj told the visiting Madhesi leaders that India was always in favour of an inclusive Nepal. SLMM leaders Mahantha Thakur, Upendra Yadav, Rajendra Mahato and Mahendra Raya Yadav came to New Delhi on December 6. During the meeting, the leaders expressed their resentment that they were often branded "pro-India" in Nepal for speaking for the rights of the Madhesi people. Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar, Indian Ambassador to Nepal Ranjit Rae, spokesperson for the Indian Ministry of External Affairs Vikas Swarup and joint secretary and Nepal desk chief Abhay Thakur attended the dinner that lasted for about two hours. Morcha leaders also met Indian National Congress leader Karan Singh, Janata Dal United leader Sharad Yadav and Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader Sitaram Yechury.

Indian security personnel detained in Nepal⁷⁷

Expressing serious concern over Indian security forces' entry into the Nepali territory on November 29, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said on November 30, that it has urged the Indian authorities to make such incidents are not repeated in future. The Armed Police Force on November 29 had detained 13 Indian Sashastra Seema Bal personnel in Kechana village of Jhapa district. They were released six hours

later after they confessed, during interrogation, that they had “entered the Nepali territory by mistake”. The Indian security personnel were detained at the APF Border Operation Post. Four of them were armed.

Diplomatic consultations held in South Block⁷⁸

During a diplomatic consultation on Nepal’s political issue held at South Block in New Delhi on December 16, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) officials urged the agitating Madhesi Morcha to “seek solutions from within the joint proposal brought by major parties.” Nepali Ambassador to India Deep Kumar Upadhyay, Chief of Nepal Desk at MEA Abhay Thakur, and other MEA officials, were present in the discussion. According to sources, the meeting took place on the request of Upadhyay. The meeting lasted for nearly one-and-half hours.

Nepali diplomatic delegation meets Indian foreign secretary⁷⁹

During a meeting with a Nepali diplomatic delegation, including Ambassador Deep Kumar Upadhyay, at the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in New Delhi on December 30, Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar said the Indian government was working to address the problems at Nepal-India border at the earliest. MEA Joint Secretary Abhaya Thakur, who looks after Nepal Affairs, and North-Division Director Mridu Pawan Das were present in the meeting. Ambassador Upadhyay was accompanied by his deputy Krishan Prasad Dhakal and political councillor Tirtha Raj Wagle. Ambassador Upadhyay advised Indian Foreign Secretary Jaishankar to adopt the strategy of pushing supplies by clearing the negative environment of obstructions at Nepal-India border, which have been in place for the past four months.

Indian Ambassador to Nepal Rae hopeful of early solution in Nepal⁸⁰

Indian envoy to Nepal Ranji Rae has said that India is supporting the ongoing efforts of Nepal government, main opposition Nepali Congress and the agitating Madhes-based parties to forge consensus. Receiving a memorandum submitted by Reporters Club Chairman Rishi Dhamala for taking initiatives to improve the deteriorating ties between Nepal and India on December 30, Rae said, “The problems of Madhes is political, so it should be resolved thorough dialogue. We support the ongoing efforts by the government, main opposition and the agitating sides. We want it to be meaningful and result-oriented.” He said India’s only interests in Nepal are stability and development. “Political problems could be resolved through dialogue. But every stakeholder should become flexible for consensus. As the dialogue process is in progress, let’s hope the decision will come and Nepal will become peace and stable and strive on the road to development,” said Ambassador Rae.

Deputy Prime Minister Thapa visits London⁸¹

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Kamal Thapa left for United Kingdom on December 15 to attend a special bicentenary reception hosted by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London on December 16 to commemorate the 200 years of Nepal-Britain relations. Thapa met his British counterpart Phillip Hammond, Minister of State for the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office Hugo Swire, Minister of State for International Development and Desmond Swayne in different meetings. The relationship and cooperation between the two countries were discussed in the meetings. Sources also informed that UK Ministers showed their concern about the humanitarian crisis caused by the blockade. Joint Secretary at Foreign Ministry Prakash Kumar Subedi, under-secretary Kumar Kharel, and his personal aide Bharat Kumar Regmi and Acting Nepali ambassador to UK Tej Bahadur Chhetri attended the meeting along with Thapa.

Deputy Prime Minister Thapa visits China⁸²

The Chinese government has decided to provide 1.4 million litres of fuel worth 10 million RMB to Nepal government in grant to meet the emergency needs, said Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Kamal Thapa. DPM Thapa informed the media about the agreement on his return from China to Nepal on December 29. Saying that his China visit was successful, Foreign Minister Thapa said the programme schedule has been finalised for Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's visit to China. He said the formal agreement for the import of fuel from China will be signed during PM's China visit. Thapa said that discussions were held with Chinese officials to re-operate the Araniko Highway, prepare the baseline for Nepal-China friendship and operate the Rasuwagadhi-Syafubesi road around the year. He said that during the discussion, Nepal also would initiate preliminary works of constructing railway in its territory in the context of China's plan to expand its railway up to the Nepal-China border. Minister Thapa said that he met with Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao and high-level officials of Sichuan province, adding that during the discussions, officials of the province expressed their wishes towards investing in hydropower in Nepal. A nine-member team including Minister Thapa had left for China on December 23, at the invitation of Foreign Minister of China Wang Yi.

Minister Pun addresses 10th ministerial-level conference of WTO⁸³

Minister for Commerce and Supplies, Ganeshman Pun, has said that obstruction in supply of daily essentials and petroleum products at border points has created negative impact in country's economy as well as humanitarian crisis. Minister Pun said so while addressing the 10th ministerial-level conference of World Trade Organisation (WTO), taking place at Nairobi in Kenya. He also stressed that all WTO member countries should respect all the agreements and bring them into practice. Similarly, the supply minister congratulated Afghanistan and Liberia for their success to get membership of the WTO. In his statement, Minister Pun said that the country has entered into a new era along with peace, stability and inclusiveness following the promulgation of a democratic and inclusive constitution. He also urged all the WTO members mainly the close neighbours to provide necessary support to Nepal to be integrated into the global economy.

Minister Pun meets Chinese, Indian counterparts in Kenya⁸⁴

Minister for Commerce and Supplies Ganesh Man Pun met Indian Minister of State for Commerce and Industry Nirmala Sitaraman and Chinese Vice Minister of Agriculture Qu Dongyu on the sidelines of the WTO Ministerial Conference in

Nairobi, Kenya on December 16, 2015. During the meeting with Indian State Minister Sitaraman, Pun briefed about the humanitarian crisis in Nepal due to the restriction of flow of goods including petroleum products, medicines, foodstuffs from various border points between Nepal and India. Minister Pun urged help and assistance from the Indian government in ending the restriction. In response, Minister Sitaraman asserted that the Indian government had not imposed any restriction upon Nepal and the goods flow through border was halted due to tensions on the Nepali side of the border. Minister Pun's meeting with Chinese Vice Minister Dongyu was focused on resuming the Nepal-China border points. Vice Minister Dongyu said China was ready to lend any kind of support to Nepal by improving the state of the border points between the two countries.

SLMM announces fresh stir programmes⁸⁵

The Samyukta Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha (SLMM) has announced fresh protest programmes, saying that the meeting held between the government and Nepali Congress on December 18 as irrelevant. The fresh stir announced by Morcha includes burning of the amendment proposal tabled at the Parliament by the government and Nepali Congress, baton and torch rally and disruption of any programmes in Madhes that is organised by Ministers and other lawmakers. The agitating Madhesi Morcha announced the protest programmes through a press release after the government and the main opposition Nepali Congress decided to postpone the parliamentary proceedings.

Nepal Cabinet's 3-point decision to address Madhesi demands⁸⁶

The Indian Government has welcomed the decisions taken by Nepal's Cabinet on December 20 to address and resolve demands regarding the Constitution raised by agitating Madhes-based parties. In a statement on December 21, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) hailed "the decisions as positive steps" that help create the basis for a resolution of the current impasse in Nepal. "These decisions include amendments to the Constitution on participation in the state organs on the basis of proportionate inclusiveness and delineation of electoral constituencies on the basis of population. The demarcation of provinces is also to be addressed through an appropriate arrangement in the Constitution on the basis of political consensus. Similarly, other demands including citizenship are to be resolved through negotiations and consensus," read the statement. A meeting of Samyukta Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha held on December 22 said that the government's 3-point proposal is not acceptable to the Morcha, and therefore they decided to continue with their protest programmes.

CPN (Samyukta) withdraws support to Oli Government⁸⁷

CPN (Samyukta) has withdrawn its support to the incumbent government under Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli. A Central Committee meeting of the party came to the decision on December 22, 2015. "The government's failure to address the current crises in the country, unsatisfactory performance of the cabinet and involvement of government in black marketing has led us to take the decision," said Chairman Ganesh Shah. The party has three lawmakers. This reduces the support to the Oli-led government to 335 lawmakers in the parliament.

International community expresses deepest concern⁸⁸

Nepal-based international community issued a joint statement on December 8, expressing their deepest concern at the critical and growing shortages of essential and lifesaving medicines and supplies at health care facilities. This is the first time a joint statement has been issued since the blockade began which has led to critical shortages of medicines in the country. The statement issued by World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), Department for International Development (DFID), German Development Cooperation (GDC, GIZ, KfW), and Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) states that the present crisis is grave and if it continues the effects will exacerbate.

Government of Nepal requests Saudi Arabia to provide 20,000 kl fuel in grant⁸⁹

The government of Nepal has requested Saudi Arabia to provide fuel to Nepal in grant in order to cope with fuel crisis facing the country following India's unofficial blockade. Under secretary at the Ministry of Commerce and Supplies Shiva Prasad Tripathi said that the government, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, requested Saudi government to provide Nepal with 20,000 kiloliters diesel and petrol in grant. Earlier, the government had brought in 1.3 million liters petrol in grant from China.

Japan provides Rs 26.19 billion support for post-earthquake reconstruction⁹⁰

The Government of Japan has agreed to provide an assistance of Rs 26.19 billion (Japanese Yen 30 billion) to assist Nepal on post earthquake reconstruction. The assistance consists of loan assistance of Japanese Yen 14 billion for Emergency School Reconstruction Project, Japanese Yen 12 billion for Emergency Housing Reconstruction Project and Japanese Yen 4 billion of grant assistance for reconstruction of Maternity Hospital, rehabilitation of water supply system in Sindhupalchok and construction of bridge in Barhakilo Barpak road in Gorkha District.

India extends financial assistance for construction of a campus building in Gulmi⁹¹

India has extended a financial assistance of NRs 41.36 million for construction of campus building for Chandrakot Campus, Shantipur VDC in Gulmi district as a part of Nepal-India Cooperation Programme of the Government of India. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed for construction of the building on December 28, 2015. The project is being implemented by the District Development Committee, Gulmi. The campus building is sixth educational project supported by the Government of India in Gulmi district. In addition, the Government of India has extended financial assistance of approximate NRs 551 million towards renovation, restoration and upgradation of various sites of religious, educational, cultural and historical importance in Nepal in financial year 2015-2016.

German provides Rs 3 billion plus grant assistance⁹²

The German Government has agreed to provide a total grant assistance of Rs 3.46 billion to the government of Nepal. The government of Germany provided the assistance as a special commitment for Recovery Programme in the aftermath of

devastating April 25 earthquake. At a programme organised at the Ministry of Finance on December 14, Finance Secretary Lok Darshan Regmi and German Ambassador to Nepal, Matthias Meyer, signed the agreement. Out of the grant assistance, of Rs 2.89 billion is financial assistance while Rs 579.3 million was the technical assistance, according to a press statement issued from the Ministry. The grant assistance would be used for the implementation of various projects such as rehabilitation of some heritage sites including surrounding school buildings in Bhaktapur district, reconstruction of district hospitals in Gorkha, Rasuwa, Dolakha and Ramechhap districts and rehabilitation of rural electrification in Rasuwa district which were damaged by the earthquake.

Government of Nepal waives visa fee for Chinese tourists⁹³

In a bid to boost arrivals from China, the Cabinet decided to waive the fee for Chinese visitors—a facility enjoyed only by visitors from SAARC countries so far. The Cabinet decision came immediately after Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Kamal Thapa announced the new visa policy during bilateral talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing on December 26. The Chinese government also lifted travel advisories to its citizens travelling to Nepal with immediate effect. The advisory was issued by the Chinese consular service network in the context of earthquakes in Nepal.

Pakistan

Sharif –Modi meet in Paris⁹⁴

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi met for a brief meeting on the sidelines of a climate summit in Paris on November 30. The meeting took place when Modi went to the lounge for visiting leaders and found Sharif sitting there, according to a diplomatic source who witnessed the interaction. Noticing Sharif's presence, Modi walked up to him. The two leaders then warmly shook hands and sat next to each other and briefly chatted. No official delegates were present during the meeting. Spokesman for the Indian Ministry of External Affairs Vikas Swarup was quoted by Indian media as having said that there was only "exchange of courtesies". But, according to TV channel reports, Prime Minister Sharif said that "talks with PM Narendra Modi were good. Doors of dialogue should open".

The national security advisers of Pakistan and India meet in Bangkok⁹⁵

The national security advisers of Pakistan and India met for a brief and unannounced meeting in Bangkok on December 6. It is believed that the meeting in Paris between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Prime Minister Modi on the sidelines of the Climate Change Summit broke the ice. Britain and the United States are said to have nudged the two leaders to make a fresh attempt by restarting their dialogue on outstanding disputes.

Indian Foreign Minister attends 'Heart of Asia' conference⁹⁶

Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj went to Pakistan on December 8 to attend the 'Heart of Asia' process ministerial meeting. About the conference, she said: "Heart of Asia conference is very important for India because it is associated with Afghanistan. That is why I have come here to participate." She was received

at the airport by Pakistani Foreign Office officials.

“War with Pakistan not an option”: Sushma Swaraj⁹⁷

War is not an option and dialogue is the way forward with Pakistan to fight the ‘shadow of terror’, Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj told parliament on December 16. According to Press Trust of India, she told the Lok Sabha that India had decided to hold dialogue with Pakistan as it was the only way to remove the shadow of terrorism. Swaraj said Pakistan and India had decided to hold talks on terrorism when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Narendra Modi met in Ufa, Russia, in July and then in Paris. ‘India has raised cross-border terrorism at many international forums’ “We said we can talk so that terrorism comes to an end. So talks (between national security advisers) took place in Bangkok where we discussed about terrorism. But one meeting will not bring a solution to all the problems. So we will continue the dialogue,” she said during Question Hour.

Prime Minister Modi makes surprise visit to Pakistan⁹⁸

On his return to Delhi from Kabul, Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi made an unscheduled visit to Pakistan on December 25. Nawaz Sharif personally received Narendra Modi at the Lahore airport. The US, UN and China welcomed Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s surprise visit to Pakistan, saying improved ties between the two neighbours will benefit the entire region.

Imran Khan meets Prime Minister Modi⁹⁹

Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf Chairman Imran Khan called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi. The meeting took place at Khan’s request. The Pakistan foreign ministry spokesperson said the two leaders welcomed recent developments in bilateral relations. During the meeting, Khan invited Modi to visit Pakistan. Imran Khan was on a two-day visit to India during which he attended a conference on India-Pakistan relations.

Pakistan ready to assist US in California shooting case: Nisar¹⁰⁰

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan said that the California shooting incident was a deplorable act. Addressing a press conference, he said the government and his ministry had already condemned the incident in which 14 people were gunned down. Chaudhry Nisar said the government was ready to provide legal assistance to the United States in the case and fully cooperate under the international law. According to information gathered so far, he said, the woman’s family had moved to Saudi Arabia some 25 years ago. He was referring to Tashfeen Malik, a Pakistani woman accused along with her husband of carrying out the massacre in California. Her family was from Dera Ghazi Khan and some of its members were also settled in the United Kingdom, he added. He said it was inappropriate to hold a particular sect, religion or country responsible for the act of an individual. The minister noted that the US had adopted a responsible attitude. He dismissed as baseless reports about the meeting of a US delegation with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif or Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif in London in connection with the shooting incident. The issue did not come up under discussion

during the prime minister's stay in the UK. "There are channels for intelligence sharing which include the foreign and interior ministries," he said.

Joint military exercise begins in China¹⁰¹

A two-week long joint training exercise 'YOUYI 5' between special forces of China and Pakistan started in Qingtongxia city of China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. According to ISPR, opening ceremony was attended by senior military officers of special forces of Pakistan and People's Liberation Army (PLA). The joint exercise as part of Year of Friendship 2015 focussed on anti-terrorist operations, hostage and rescue, cordon and search operations. The YOUYI 5 is being carried out in extreme weather conditions of northern China to impart and share Pakistan Army's experiences in war against terrorism.

Long-range, nuclear-capable missile tested¹⁰²

Pakistan tested its longest-range and nuclear-capable missile Shaheen III for validation of design and technical parameters on December 11. The surface-to-surface ballistic missile was first tested in March 2015. The solid-fuel Shaheen III has a maximum range of 2750km, which equals the farthest point in India's north-east and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. At the time of its introduction, it was said the new missile was meant for augmenting the credibility of the country's deterrence capability by bringing entire India within its striking range. The test has come in the midst of reports that the US is pressuring Pakistan to restrict its long-range missile programme.

Pakistan confirms participation in Saudi-led anti-terror alliance¹⁰³

After initial ambiguity, the Pakistan government confirmed on December 16 its participation in a Saudi-led military alliance for 'fighting terrorism', but said the scope of its participation would be defined after Riyadh shared the details of the coalition it was assembling. Senior officials at the foreign ministry initially expressed surprise at Pakistan being included in the new group, and said that Riyadh had not taken Islamabad on board. But subsequent developments revealed that Saudi Arabia had been given a secret commitment regarding joining the alliance, about which the Foreign Office was not aware. There were speculations about who had given that assurance. The military had started in October a new phase in the bilateral defence relationship by training Saudi Special Forces personnel in countering terrorism. Chief of Army Staff Gen Raheel Sharif visited Saudi Arabia after the special exercises for discussions on counter-terrorism efforts.

President meets his Chinese counterpart¹⁰⁴

President Mamnoon Hussain and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping reiterated their resolve on December 16 to further bolster the multi-faceted strategic partnership between Pakistan and China in all areas of mutual interest. The two leaders, who met in China on the sidelines of the Second World Internet Conference, discussed the bilateral relations and also exchanged views on the situation in the region.

Pakistani Taliban reject Baghdadi's 'caliph' claim¹⁰⁵

Pakistani Taliban have rejected Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's claim to be the global leader of Muslims, the movement said in a statement. The Pakistani Taliban's statement comes after a similar rejection by the Afghan Taliban following pledges of allegiance to leader of the militant Islamic State (IS) group from low-level commanders of both movements. The latest statement from the Pakistani Taliban comes amid speculation that the group's leadership, whose goal is to topple the government and set up a Sharia state, is actually wary of IS, which is driven by different ambitions that have little to do with South Asia. "Baghdadi is not Khalifa (caliph) because in Islam, Khalifa means that he has command over all the Muslim world, while Baghdadi has no such command; he has command over a specific people and territory," the Pakistan Taliban said in the statement.

US, Pakistan discuss security situation¹⁰⁶

The 24th meeting of the US-Pakistan Defence Consultative Group (DCG) was held in Washington on December 16 and 17. Defence Secretary Lt. Gen. (Retired) Muhammad Alam Khattak led the Pakistani delegation at talks while Under Secretary of Defence for Policy Christine E. Wormuth led the US team. During the two-day defence talks with Pakistan, the United States discussed "the political and security situation" in the region with the Pakistani delegation, says a joint statement issued on December 18. According to the joint statement, the US team also discussed President Barack Obama's decision to sustain a longer US military presence in Afghanistan and the administration's counter-terrorism priorities.

Pakistan in talks with US to procure latest F-16 jets: Air chief¹⁰⁷

Chief of Air Staff Air Chief Marshal Sohail Aman said on December 28 that Pakistan is in negotiations with the United States to procure the latest F-16 fighter jets, but did not specify an exact number. "We are in talks with US defence officials to get some latest F-16s but the deal may take some time," the Air chief said while talking to reporters after the rolling out ceremony of the 16th JF-17 Thunder aircraft at the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC) Kamra. The Air chief said by the year 2020, Pakistan Air Force will say "goodbye to some of its old fighter jets including the Mirage."

Pakistan pushes for JF-17 fighter aircraft sale to Sri Lanka - report¹⁰⁸

Following the first export deal for its JF-17 multirole fighter to Myanmar, Pakistan is expected to be pushing hard for a follow-up agreement with Sri Lanka that would mark an important step in further extending its defence co-operation footprint in the Indian Ocean region, a report in *IHS Jane's Defense Weekly* said. Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) commander Air Marshal Gagan Bulathsinhala visited Pakistan in mid-November 2015, during which the JF-17 was showcased by the Pakistanis. Immediately after the visit A.M. Bulathsinhala was invited to send an evaluation team of technicians and pilots to PAC's Kamra facilities near Islamabad, where the JF-17 is produced. In October Sri Lankan English weekly *Sunday Observer* reported that India has offered Sri Lanka its brand new, home-made 'Tejas' Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) to counter an offer from Pakistan to sell its JF-17 fighters. The SLAF, which already flies several other Chinese-made aircraft types, is currently

Sri Lanka

looking to upgrade its fighter capabilities. SLAF officials have reportedly argued that despite the high price tags, given the emerging global geo-political scenario, Sri Lanka needs to replace its currently ageing fleet of Israeli Kfirs and MIg 27s with a new generation of high technology aircraft to replenish Sri Lanka's air defense capability.

IMF completes 9th review of Pakistan's economic performance¹⁰⁹

The executive board of International Monetary Fund (IMF) completed the ninth review of Pakistan's economic performance under a 36-month programme supported by an Extended Fund Facility arrangement on December 18. The board's decision results in the immediate disbursement of about \$498.1 million, bringing the IMF's total disbursements to about \$4.98 billion. In completing the ninth review, the executive board also approved the authorities' request for waiver of non-observance of the end-September 2015 performance criteria on the ceiling on overall budget deficit and the ceiling on net domestic assets of State Bank. It also approved modification of the end-December 2015 performance criterion on net domestic assets of the SBP.

Prime Minister insists no CEPA, new deal with India¹¹⁰

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe told Parliament that Sri Lanka will not sign the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with India. He said that the Sri Lankan Government is negotiating a new agreement on economic and technological cooperation with India. The Prime Minister said that under the new proposed agreement with India, local youth will get more job opportunities in Sri Lanka. Opposition member Dinesh Gunawardena urged the Prime Minister to have a discussion with the opposition before the new agreement is finalised with India. The Prime Minister agreed to the request and said he will have a meeting with the opposition before December 19 to discuss the new deal.

Sri Lanka's NUG's first budget passes with a two-third majority¹¹¹

The first budget of Sri Lanka's National Unity Government (NUG) was approved in parliament with a two-third majority when the final vote was taken on December 19. Ending the Committee Stage Debate, the Third Reading of the Appropriation Bill (2016) was passed by the House with a majority of 109 votes. When a division by name was taken, 160 votes were cast in favour of the Bill while 51 votes were cast against it. The proceedings of the Budget 2016 started on November 20, 2015 with the introduction of the Appropriation Bill in parliament by Minister of Finance Ravi Karunanayake.

IMF warns Lanka facing higher financial risks¹¹²

The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned that despite continued access to international debt markets, trends in Sri Lanka suggest that financial risks for the country have increased. To mitigate these risks, the IMF says the authorities should take appropriate corrective actions to safeguard macroeconomic stability and lay the foundation for durable and inclusive growth.

Sri Lanka's economy is stable - Central Bank governor¹¹³

The Governor of Sri Lanka's Central Bank Governor Arjun Mahendran says the island nation's economy is at a stable level and the foreign reserves are sufficient at the moment. Addressing a news conference in Colombo on December 31, the Central Bank Governor said the country's economy is in a stable course and no need for an immediate loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). "Our reserves are quite comfortable. We have four and a half months of imports and the country is in no dire need of emergency funding," the official said. However, the country is examining the possibility to obtain a loan facility next year and may make a formal request to the global lender for a loan early next year, the Governor said.

Sri Lanka inflation for November rises to 4.8 per cent¹¹⁴

Sri Lanka's inflation in November 2015 determined under the new National Consumer Price Index (NCPI) rose to 4.8 per cent, compared to 3.0 per cent recorded in October 2015, on an year-on-year basis, the Department of Census and Statistics said on December 21. The NCPI for all items for the month of November 2015 increased by 2.65 per cent to 112.0 in November 2015 compared to 109.2 recorded for October 2015. The increase in index was due to the increase of food items by 2.14 per cent and increase of non food items by 0.51 per cent, the Department of Census and Statistics said.

Colombo Port handles over 5 million containers in 2015¹¹⁵

Sri Lanka's Colombo Port for the first time in history has handled over 5 million twenty-foot-equivalent units container volume in 2015, according to latest figures in port services. In 2014, the Colombo Port handled a container volume of 4.908 million TEUs. It has been reported that 3,854 container vessels have come to Colombo Harbour during 2015, compared to the 3,742 arrived in 2014. Sri Lanka's Colombo Port has emerged as a growing transshipment hub capable of handling the increasing number of mega-ships vessels with capacities of 10,000 TEUs and up. CMA CGM Marco Polo, one of the world's largest container ships with a capacity of 16,020 TEUs arrived in Colombo in late September.

Sri Lanka mulls special zone for Chinese investment¹¹⁶

Sri Lanka is considering a special zone in the South for Chinese investors as China looks to expand its investment in the island nation. In an interview to China's Xinhua news agency, the Chairman of the Board of Investments (BoI) Upul Jayasuriya has said that the government had decided to set up the zone in the southern town of Hambantota where China funded the construction of a harbour and an international airport. Sri Lanka has already conveyed its decision to China and is now awaiting a response, he said.

Sri Lanka seeks loan facilities from China Exim Bank¹¹⁷

Sri Lanka has sought loan facilities from China's Exim Bank to fund the construction of a segment of the Central Expressway from capital Colombo to Kandy in central hills. Cabinet spokesperson Dr. Rajitha Senarathne said the Cabinet of Ministers

approved a proposal made by Minister of Higher Education and Highways Lakshman Kiriella to examine the possibility of obtaining loan facilities from the EXIM Bank of China to construct the segment from Kadawatha to Kossinna. The cabinet has given the approval to obtaining proposals from Metallurgical Corporation of China for the construction work.

EU housing project to benefit more than 300, 000 people¹¹⁸

With a financial envelope of €14 million, more than 300, 000 people are expected to benefit from the support provided by the European Union to build houses and improve community infrastructure for internally displaced people and returnees. The activities will be implemented from 2016-2018 in nine selected divisions of the Killinochchi, Mullaitivu and Batticaloa districts by Habitat for Humanity. This initiative dovetails on the earlier housing programmes for which the European Union contributed with €50 million in the districts of Killinochchi, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Vavuniya and Batticaloa. Speaking during the signing of the project, Ambassador of the Delegation of the European Union to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, David Daly said, "the project contributes to a sustainable solution for returnee families with the specific objective of improving the living conditions and social cohesion of displaced people, returnees and their host communities."

Lanka declared eligible for MCC assistance¹¹⁹

At the meeting of the Board of Directors of the US Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) held in Washington DC, Sri Lanka was selected as an eligible country for assistance from the fiscal year 2016, the Foreign Ministry said. This decision of the Board was conveyed by telephone to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, by the Chief Executive Officer of the MCC, Dana J. Hyde. The Foreign Ministry said that the selection of Sri Lanka as an eligible country for long-term partnership with the MCC is a demonstration of recognition of the progress made by Sri Lanka since January 2015 under the leadership of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

US envoy Shannon visits Sri Lanka¹²⁰

US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Designate) Thomas Shannon met Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka Mangala Samaraweera on December 14 during his visit to Sri Lanka. After the meeting in a press conference Shannon announced that the first meeting of the U.S.-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue will take place in February 2016 in Washington, DC. He also went to Trincomalee during the visit. Speaking in Trincomalee on December 15, he said that during his visit it was exciting to witness first-hand the important work that communities, civil society organisations, and local authorities across this island are undertaking to improve the living standards of Sri Lankans. He said the US will continue support to communities in the East, currently worth more than 3.2 billion Sri Lankan rupees (\$23 million).

U.S. examines future role of Sri Lanka's security forces¹²¹

The United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) for South and Southeast Asia Dr. Amy Searight, who concluded her three-day visit to Sri Lanka

from December 17-19, has examined the future role Sri Lankan security forces could play in humanitarian assistance, responding to natural disasters, and increased participation in overseas peacekeeping operations. A high profile US delegation, headed by DASD Searight met with Defence Secretary Karunasena Hettiarachchi as well as Foreign Secretary Chitranganee Wagiswara to discuss the Sri Lankan government's efforts on security sector reform, as well as training and vetting personnel for United Nations peacekeeping operations. DASD Searight paid office calls upon the Chief of Defense Staff, and the respective Tri-Service Commanders, to stress the need for land returns, reconciliation and a credible transitional justice mechanism, and to discuss future security requirements. During the meeting with Commander of Army, Lieutenant General Crishanthe De Silva, she exchanged views pertaining to UN troop deployment, practical readiness for UN troop deployment, preparedness of Sri Lankan troops for future UN assignments, exchange of expertise in technical fields, present overseas deployments and training for UN assignments, progress of de-mining work and troop training at Kukuleganga Institute of Peace Support Operations Training Sri Lanka (IPSOTSL). She had dinner with the Deputy Foreign Minister, Dr. Harsha De Silva; the State Minister of Defence, Ruwan Wijewardene; and the Deputy Minister of State Enterprise Development, Eran Wickramaratne. In discussions with the NGOs involved in de-mining, DASD Searight discussed ongoing demining work in northern and eastern Sri Lanka and reaffirmed "the United States is committed to addressing the land mine problem in Sri Lanka," which since 1993 has received U.S. assistance worth 6 billion rupees (\$43 million). She concluded her visit by travelling to the Institute for Peace Support Operations Training Sri Lanka, where forces are trained prior to joining UN peace-keeping missions.

U.S. Ambassador discusses future infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka¹²²

U.S. Ambassador to Colombo Atul Keshap met with Minister of Megapolis and Western Development Champika Ranawaka on December 18. During the meeting, Ambassador Keshap and Minister Ranawaka discussed future infrastructure projects essential to Sri Lanka's prosperity, energy production and environmental protection, and progress on the development of a new constitution.

US Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Biswal arrives in Sri Lanka¹²³

The United States Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Biswal came to Sri Lanka on December 20 on a private visit.

Australia, Sri Lanka review bilateral relationship at senior officials' talks¹²⁴

The First Round of Senior Officials' Talks between Sri Lanka and Australia was held on December 16, 2015 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Colombo. The Australian delegation was led by Deputy Secretary of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Ric Wells, and the Sri Lanka delegation by Additional Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ranjith Uyangoda. The talks broadly focused on bilateral trade, investment and economic diplomacy, development partnership, Sri Lanka's reconciliation process, including regional and multilateral issues. Identifying new areas of cooperation under Australia's future development assistance priorities for Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Government's new policies

for growth and development, both sides agreed to further build on the added momentum in the bilateral partnership, follow-up on the discussions and regularly review progress. The next Senior Officials' Talks will be held in the first quarter of 2017.

President Maithripala Sirisena visits Vatican on invitation of Pope Francis¹²⁵

President Maithripala Sirisena went to Vatican on a special invitation of Pope Francis. During the visit he participated in a banquet hosted by Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith Cardinal on December 15 at St. Thomas Church in Livia Bella in Rome. President Sirisena thanking the Archbishop for hosting the banquet said that His Holiness Pope Francis' visit to Sri Lanka in January 2015 was a great blessing for him. He further said that the current Vatican tour left him with unforgettable memories. Rev Valence Mendis -Bishop of Chilaw Diocese, Secretary General of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan delegation participated in the event.

Sri Lanka invites Saudi Arabia to set up oil refinery in Hambantota¹²⁶

Sri Lanka has invited Saudi Arabia to set up a petroleum refinery in the southern part of the island, the Governor of the Central Bank Arjuna Mahendran has said according to a report in Arab News. Mahendran, who led a high-powered delegation, comprising chairmen and CEOs of commercial and state banks in Colombo, to the Kingdom, ended his Saudi visit on December 23, 2015. Mahendran held talks with Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA) Gov. Fahad bin Abdullah Al-Mubarak on December 22. To help expatriates working in the Kingdom, Mahendran said he was negotiating with the SAMA governor to enable Sri Lankans' remittances from Saudi Arabia to reach their banks at home in 60 seconds. "SAMA has responded positively to consider opening the payment gateway to enable these services in a year or two," he added. Representatives from leading banks such as Bank of Ceylon, People's Bank, Commercial Bank, HNB, NDB, Amana, Seylan Bank, Sampath Bank and Deutsche Bank AG accompanied the governor.

Sri Lanka Navy arrests Indian fishermen¹²⁷

Sri Lanka Navy has arrested six Indian fishermen along with an Indian fishing trawler poaching in Sri Lankan waters on December 20. Indian authorities said the six fishermen belong to Pudukkottai district. The arrested fishermen have been brought to Kankasanthurai along with the trawler and handed over to the officials of the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (Jaffna) for further action. The arrest came days after the Navy arrested four Indian fishermen along with their boat when they were fishing northwest of Delft Island on December 17. The Sri Lankan Navy had arrested 14 Tamil fishermen in November and detained their three fishing boats. The country had released 126 Tamil fishermen lodged in Lankan jail as a goodwill gesture. The Chief Minister of Indian state of Tamil Nadu J. Jayalalithaa asked the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to urgently take up the issue with the Sri Lankan authorities at the appropriate level and ensure the immediate release of the 41 fishermen, 56 fishing boats and fishing gear from Sri Lankan custody. Indian fishermen held at the Jaffna prison staged a fast

on December 24 in protest over their detention, the Jaffna media reported. At least 51 Indian fishermen launched the fast demanding that they be released immediately to mark Christmas day.

Korea willing to assist Sri Lanka to develop fishing industry¹²⁸

The Government of South Korea is willing to extend fully-pledged support to promote the Fisheries Industry in Sri Lanka, the Korean Ambassador to Colombo Won-sam Chang has informed the State Minister of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development Dilip Wedaarachchi, the Fisheries Ministry said. At a meeting with the Sri Lankan minister recently, the Korean envoy has discussed ways to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the field of fisheries. The Ambassador has officially handed over an official invitation of the Korean Government to the State Minister Dilip Wedaarachchi to visit Korea to explore the Fisheries Sector in that country.

Australia extends support to Sri Lanka's fishery industry¹²⁹

An Australian trade delegation headed by Australian Trade Commissioner Grayson Perry recently held a meeting with the Minister of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development, Mahinda Amaraweera at the Ministry in Colombo. At the discussion, the Australian Trade Commissioner has agreed to extend support to provide the necessary knowledge and training, on the methods and ways followed by Australia, to the officers of the Ministry of Fisheries and to the officers of the institutions coming under the Fisheries Ministry and to conduct and maintain the fisheries industry in Sri Lanka, on a sound footing.

Sri Lanka naval ships on a training and goodwill visit to India¹³⁰

Two of Sri Lanka naval ships were on a training and goodwill visit to India from December 21-24, 2015. Sri Lanka Navy's Offshore Patrol Vessel, SLNS Samudura and Fast Missile Vessel SLNS Nandimitra with 328 navy personnel including 89 Midshipmen took part in the four-day training program in India. The visit allowed the Sri Lankan Navy personnel to meet and interact with their Indian counterparts, strengthening the bilateral relations and friendship between the two friendly navies, the Navy said. The SLN ships made their port of call at Kochi in India and the crew went ashore to make familiarisation visits to a number of training schools belonging to the Southern Naval Command of the Indian Navy during their stay. The ships' Commanding Officers paid courtesy calls with the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, the Chief of Staff and the Flag Officer Sea Training of the Southern Naval Command.

Tamil People's Conference formed in Jaffna¹³¹

Northern Province Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran has been appointed as the head of a new organisation called 'Tamil People's Conference' comprising Tamil politicians and civil society members. The 'Tamil People's Conference' met on December 19 in Jaffna and discussed its future goals and also decided to form sub-committees which will handle various tasks. The main committee in the 'Tamil People's Conference' includes Tamil National Alliance members Dharmalingham Sidharthan and Suresh Premachandran and Tamil National People's Front leader Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam among others. The sub-committees appointed by

the 'Tamil People's Conference' have been given a time frame during which it will submit proposals to address issues faced by the Tamils.

Sri Lanka Army releases another 700 acres of land in North¹³²

Sri Lanka Army, in keeping with the new government's policy to release more security forces-held lands to the civilians, has released another 700 acres. The Army has formally released 700 acres of land held by Armed Forces in Valikamam North area of Jaffna and handed them over to the Jaffna Government Agent Nagalingam Vedanayagam. According to the Government Agent 300 families have lived in the land before the war but since the boundary markers of the plots have been removed, the lands need to be re-measured before handing over to the owners.

Representatives of the CTBTO meet President Maithripala Sirisena¹³³

A group of representatives of the Comprehensive Nuclear- Test –Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO) headed by Lassina Zerbo the Executive Secretary of the CTBTO met President Maithripala Sirisena at the President's official residence. During the meeting, a cordial discussion was held between the President and the representatives. These representatives met with the President during their training programme held at the Kandalamahotel, Dambulla from November 29 to December 5, 2015. Nearly 100 persons representing 13 countries including Sri Lanka participated at this training programme.

Permanent representative to the OPCW addresses conference on chemical weapons¹³⁴

Sri Lanka has urged the world community to stand firm and united in combating terrorism. This call was made when Sri Lanka's Ambassador to the Netherlands and Permanent Representative to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Adam M.J. Sadiq addressed the 20th Session of the Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention in the Hague on December 2. Sri Lanka's Ambassador spoke of the relationship between the OPCW and Sri Lanka and noted "the capacity building programme on the Safe and Secure Management of Hazardous Substances held in Sri Lanka in September 2015 in collaboration with Holcim Lanka Ltd. He also referred to the OPCW Associate Program 2015, in which Load Star (Pvt) Company Ltd. of Sri Lanka hosted the industrial attachment of two participants from Tunisia and Poland in September 2015, enabling them to gain practical experience in a sophisticated industrial environment".

End Notes

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