

SOUTH ASIA TRENDS

January 2015

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

Defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa by his fellow party member Maithripala Sirisena in the January 8 Presidential elections came as a surprise to many. Though, Mahinda Rajapaksa was criticised for his authoritarian style of functioning by many both at home and abroad, and hoped to see a change of regime in the island, nobody thought that he could be defeated in a free and fair election. Media report suggested that an attempt was made to declare emergency to derail the election process, but the transition of power was peaceful. There is a hope that with the change of regime things will move in the right direction in Sri Lanka.

Political uncertainties are looming large in Bangladesh and Nepal. Confinement of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) chief Khaleda Zia to her Gulshan office by the law enforcers for two weeks led to sporadic violence in the country. She was confined to stop the BNP from holding a rally to denounce the one-sided parliamentary election held exactly a year ago on January 5, 2014. Ruling Awami League (AL) however, celebrated January 5 as the "victory day for democracy". This resulted in violent clashes between the BNP and AL cadres on the streets. Hundreds of people have lost their lives due to the ongoing violence in the country. Despite the concerns of the international community, neither the BNP nor the AL is ready for unconditional talk to stop the violence.

Constituent Assembly (CA) of Nepal has again failed to meet the deadline to promulgate the new constitution on January 22, 2015 as it could not resolve the disputed issues. The ruling parties wanted to promulgate the new constitution through voting, but the 19-party opposition block led by the UCPN (Maoist) has insisted on forging a political consensus on the disputed issues. Though the ruling party has said that it would follow the peaceful and democratic means outlined in the Interim Constitution to promulgate the new constitution, it also hinted that CA cannot wait indefinitely for generating a consensus. In this situation, there is little chance that Nepal will get a new constitution soon.

Afghanistan security forces became very active to take on the militants after the security transition from NATO forces. The government of Afghanistan has asked the security forces to eliminate all kinds of terrorism. Government has also approved special military operations in a bid to tackle the terrorist activities by anti-government armed militant groups. The Afghan national security forces are however instructed to take all necessary measures to respect the Islamic values, the Afghan culture, Afghan constitution and other laws of the country while executing special military operations.

Pakistan extended its cooperation to Afghanistan to combat terrorism in the region. In a move towards improving border coordination and deepening military-to-military ties, Pakistan and Afghanistan opened a series of meetings of commanders. This has unfolded a new chapter in Af-Pak relations.

The region is going through an interesting period. The January issue has outlined some of the interesting developments during the month in seven South Asian countries.

Afghanistan

Presidential palace celebrates the completion of security transition from NATO forces¹

The NATO combat mission in Afghanistan formally ended on December 31 and replaced with new mission of the alliance called "Resolute Support" aimed at training, advising and assisting the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). A ceremony was organised in the Presidential Palace in Kabul celebrating the completion of security transition from NATO forces to ANSF on January 1, 2015. The ceremony was attended by high-profile dignitaries including the Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, former President Hamid Karzai, the acting Interior Minister Ayoub Salangi, the acting head of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) Rahmatullah Nabil, army generals, police officers and parliamentarians.

The ANSF is asked to eliminate militant groups without mercy²

The deputy Minister of Defense Baz Mohammad Jawhari asked the security forces to eliminate all the armed groups operating under the names of Daesh [ISIS], Al-Qaeda or Taliban that attack Afghan security forces. These statements were expressed after some local officials in Helmand and Nimruz provinces confirmed sightings of apparent Islamic State (IS) fighters with black flags. The rumours of IS presence grew sharply after the ANSF assumed the full security responsibility from the NATO troops. Meanwhile, the ANSF have pushed back militants from the district of Chak in central Maidan Wardak province after 13 years under Taliban control. The security forces have also regained a number of strategic locations in Dangam. A joint clearing operation has been launched by Afghan National Army (ANA) commandos, NDS soldiers and the Afghan Border Police (ABP) in Dangam district of Kunar province.

Government approves special military operations against insurgents³

The government of Afghanistan approved special military operations in a bid to tackle the terrorist activities by anti-government armed militant groups. During a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) chaired by President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, the special military raids were approved after incorporating new changes. According to the NSC, special military raids are one of the most effective approaches to fight terrorism and organised crimes. The Afghan national security forces were instructed to take all necessary measures to respect the Islamic values, the Afghan culture, Afghan constitution and other laws of the country while executing a special military operation.

Cabinet officially introduced to WJ⁴

President Ashraf Ghani officially introduced the National Unity Government's cabinet members to the Wolesi Jirga (WJ) or Lower House of Parliament for a confidence vote on January 20. The Wolesi Jirga approved only nine out of 19 cabinet nominees.

Afghan parliamentary delegates visit Pakistan⁵

A delegation of Afghan lawmakers jointly led by Chairman of the International Affairs Commission of the Wolesi Jirga Abdul Qader Zazai and Senator Baz

Mohammad Zormati visited Islamabad to attend the 12th session of the dialogue between parliamentarians of both the countries. During the visit the delegation met Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. During the meeting, Afghan lawmakers condemned the attack on a school in Peshawar. They said peace and stability was in larger interests of both the countries. The lawmakers also invited Sharif to visit Afghanistan at his convenience.

President Ghani meets Pakistani delegation⁶

President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani discussed host of issues ranging from boosting bilateral cooperation to security, stability and fighting terrorism with a visiting Pakistani delegation which included Mahmood Khan Achakzai, Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao, and Afrasiab Khattak. Both the sides discussed in details the issue of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and measures to improve political relations, security situation and joint cooperation on combating terrorism. Former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah, national security advisor Mohammad Hanif Atmar and a number of Jihadi leaders and politicians were also present in the meeting.

India pledges US\$ 100 Million for small development projects⁷

India has pledged to donate US\$100 million as part of an initiative to advance small development projects in Afghanistan. Officials at the Ministry of Economy have said that the amount will be used for 368 small and medium projects in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. According to officials, the projects that will be funded mostly consist of infrastructure such as irrigation systems for farmlands, water filtration mechanisms and general education development.

President Ghani visits the UAE⁸

President Ashraf Ghani made a visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan received Ghani at Al Mushrif Palace. During the meeting both the leaders agreed to bolster ties in economic, developmental and social fields. The two sides also reviewed UAE's role in supporting efforts for the reconstruction of Afghanistan's health, education and infrastructure projects as well as its contribution to maintaining security. During the visit President Ghani had an audience with Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry officials and highlighted the enormous investment opportunities offered by his administration. While appreciating the UAE investment in different sectors of Afghanistan's economy, he wooed the Arab entrepreneurs to explore more opportunities in the conflict-devastated country. UAE trade leaders reportedly, expressed their willingness to invest in aviation, telecom, mining, fuel exploration and agriculture sectors.

Afghan Taliban delegation visits China⁹

A two-member delegation of Afghan Taliban visited China where they held extensive negotiations with Chinese officials. Reportedly, Qari Din Muhammad, Afghan Taliban member in Doha, visited China last November. The delegation, had discussed issues pertaining to Afghanistan and the latest political situation in the region. The Taliban delegations from its Qatar office also visited Japan, France

and Iran in the past. Besides attending different meetings and conferences, they also held talks with officials of these countries. The visit of the Taliban delegation to China came shortly after the newly-elected Afghan President Ashraf Ghani paid a four-day official trip to China.

Turkey to increase the number of its troops in Afghanistan¹⁰

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has announced that the number of Turkish troops stationed in Afghanistan will be increased from 700 to 1,100. The training mission will take place both in Afghanistan and in Turkey. Çavuşoğlu also stated that Turkey would spend 50 million Euros to run the management of the Kabul International Airport for a two-year term and would continue to support infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. The Turkish Parliament authorised the government on January 13 to continue posting Turkish troops in Afghanistan for two more years under a new NATO mission.

Afghanistan's National Security Advisor visits Iran¹¹

Afghanistan's National Security Advisor Hanif Atmar went to Tehran on January 7, 2015 on a two-day official visit. Atmar held exclusive talks with Afghan journalists and said his visit was aimed at initiating discussions with Iranian officials on proposed strategic partnership agreement, joint anti-narcotics efforts and problems facing Afghan refugees in Iran and to pave the ground for the presidents of the two countries to visit each other's countries. He said Iran had agreed to conclude a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan and teams of the two countries were working on it.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Jawad Zarif visits Kabul¹²

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Jawad Zarif met with CEO Abdullah Abdullah after he landed in Kabul on January 20 where they held wide-ranging discussion on key regional issues. Zarif expressed that the drug production and trafficking has increased in Afghanistan despite billions of dollars spent by the international community to combat the phenomenon. Pointing out the purpose of his visit to Kabul, he stressed that his country was determined to further expand relations with Afghanistan to overcome the common challenges, especially the threat of terrorism and drug trafficking.

Government revenue down 8 percent in 2014¹³

The government's revenue reached 109 billion Afghanis in 2014, showing an eight percent dip. The government revenue experiences decline at a time when foreign aid makes up 70 percent of the country's annual budget. Finance Ministry's spokesman Abdul Qadir Jilani said 44.8 billion Afghanis of the revenue had come from customs offices and the rest from private sector entrepreneurs and other sources. He linked the decline in revenue to growing insecurity and the prolonged electoral process last year.

The Wolesi Jirga approves the national budget¹⁴

The Wolesi Jirga approved the national budget for the next fiscal year (March 21, 2015 to March 20, 2016) with majority of votes (132 out of 152 votes in favour).

The approved 436.172 billion (AFS) national budget includes 283.486 billion for the ordinary budget and 152.686 billion for the development budget. Initially, the House had rejected the budget for what they called “unfair and unbalanced” fund allocations. Another reason MPs had rejected the budget was the withdrawal of 443 incomplete projects, something the MPs called a wastage of millions of dollars. The approved budget now includes all the incomplete projects; however, no new development project has been considered for the next year. The House rejected former President Hamid Karzai’s decree to pay the salaries of his advisers for five years after the end of their tenure. Head of the Wolesi Jirga’s Finance Commission, Amir Khan Yaar, said 135 billion of the budget would be paid from the domestic revenues, while the rest of them would be paid from foreign aids.

Eight journalists killed in 2014 in Afghanistan: NAI¹⁵

Reporting of 64 percent increase in the violence against journalists, a media supporting agency (NAI) called 2014 a deadliest year for reporters in Afghanistan. In a press conference presenting the annual report of 2014, the NAI director Sediquallah Tawhidi told media that eight journalists including two foreigners were killed in 2014 in Afghanistan. Tawhidi added these reporters were killed while on duty in the armed attacks and bombings by the insurgents. He added 80 cases of violence against journalists were also recorded in 2014, most of them conducted by the security forces. Tawhidi asked the National Unity Government (NUG) leaders to fulfill the commitments of supporting media and freedom of expression they made during their election campaigns.

Afghanistan condemns Paris attack¹⁶

President Ashraf Ghani has strongly condemned the terrorist attack on a French magazine “Charlie Hebdo” office which left 12 people dead and about 20 others wounded. Ghani offered condolences to the President of France, François Hollande, families of the victims and the people of France. In response to Paris shooting, an Afghan media supporting agency, NAI, has emphasised that neither anyone had the right to kill innocents nor to satirize any religion.

Bangladesh

Hasina Government bars BNP to hold rally on January 5¹⁷

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) chief Khaleda Zia had been confined to her Gulshan office for two weeks since law enforcers locked it on the night of January 3. BNP leaders said Zia wanted to go to the party’s central office at Nayapaltan, where leaders were asked to gather for holding a planned rally to denounce the January 5 one-sided parliamentary election in 2014. After police barred her from coming out Zia called the blockade of roads, railways and waterways across the country. The ruling Awami League and its various front organisations, however, brought out processions and held rallies and human chains in many parts of the city, defying an indefinite police ban on political activities, to celebrate January 5 as the “Victory Day for Democracy.” But the government took every possible measure to thwart the BNP to hold any rally in Dhaka. Subsequently, violent clashes continued across the country over the month. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina ordered the police to take whatever steps necessary to stop the violence in the country. “I’ll take the responsibility for whatever happens [due to the action]. But you’ll have to

ensure the security of the common people. You'll take whatever steps necessary against those responsible for burning and attacking people," Hasina said while addressing an evaluation meeting with senior police officials at her office, marking the Police Week 2015.

British High Commissioner in Dhaka calls for all party dialogue¹⁸

British High Commissioner in Dhaka Robert Gibson called for a dialogue among all the stakeholders to check violence and destructions. He said he was not talking about a dialogue only between two major political parties—BNP and Awami League—but among all the stakeholders including the civil society representatives. He made the call when his attention was drawn at a function in Dhaka on January 8 about political violence that killed and injured large number of people.

Foreign diplomats condemn violence in Bangladesh¹⁹

Condemning the ongoing political violence, a group of foreign diplomats in Dhaka urged the government to hold constructive dialogue with the opposition to find a peaceful solution to the current political crisis. They made the call at a meeting with Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali at state guesthouse Padma on January 19. Briefing the diplomats, the foreign minister said the BNP is a "terrorist" party. It resorted to arson and destructive activities causing loss of many lives and property. "Any dialogue with the BNP will be possible only after it behaves responsibly and severs ties with the Jamaat". Ambassadors and representatives of the US, UN, China, Japan, Brazil, Australia, North Korea and South Korea attended the briefing organised as part of the foreign minister's regular consultations with ambassadors and heads of mission in Dhaka.

The UNHRC expresses concerns over the political situation in Bangladesh²⁰

Expressing concern over the political situation in Bangladesh, the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) in a statement issued on January 16 urged all political parties to show restraint and bring an immediate end to violence. The statement comes on the 11th day of the blockade called by BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia after she failed to come out of her Gulshan office to hold a rally to mark the first anniversary of the January 5 polls as the "Democracy Killing Day".

BNP delegation meets representative of foreign missions in Dhaka²¹

A high-level BNP delegation held a meeting with chiefs and representatives of different foreign missions in Dhaka at the Gulshan residence of BNP standing committee member Moyeen Khan on January 15. As the party informed diplomats about their "peaceful" movement to force the government to sit with the opposition over a fresh election, diplomats expressed concern over the violence and vandalism during the ongoing blockade and called upon the BNP to stop this. The BNP delegation insisted that they are not involved in the violence. The mission chiefs of European Union, Spain, the Netherlands, Australia, France, Norway, Sweden and political consultant of Canada, among others, attended the two-and-a-half-hour meeting.

India won't interfere in Bangladesh's internal affairs²²

New Delhi reiterated that it would not interfere in Bangladesh's internal affairs. "It's for the government and people of Bangladesh to determine what sort of society they want and the issues they face," Syed Akbaruddin, spokesperson for India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), told in a media briefing in New Delhi. He made the remarks when he was asked whether India was playing any role as several BNP leaders are seeking the country's support to "restore democracy" in Bangladesh.

India-Bangladesh regional meeting on trans-border issues²³

A two-day regional meeting on trans-border issues between Bangladesh and India concluded in Shillong on January 13. The officials from Sylhet and Mymensingh regions and the Indian state agreed to resolve the issues, including killing of civilians. Smuggling of arms and drugs and human trafficking were, among others, discussed in the meeting.

Third border haat launched²⁴

Bangladesh and India jointly opened the third border haat on January 13 along the Feni-Tripura frontier in an effort to boost smooth trading between people of the two countries. Commerce Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and her Bangladesh counterpart Tofail Ahmed inaugurated the haat.

Malaysian International Trade and Industries Affairs Minister meets PM²⁵

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina sought increased investment from Malaysia for the mutual benefits of the two friendly countries. The Prime Minister made the request when visiting Malaysian International Trade and Industries Affairs Minister Mustapa Mohammed met her at her official residence Ganabhaban.

Hasina congratulates Ranil Wickremasinghe²⁶

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina congratulated Ranil Wickremasinghe, the new Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. Hasina mentioned that Bangladesh and Sri Lanka enjoy excellent bilateral relations based on common ethos and values in her congratulatory message.

President pays last respect to late Saudi King²⁷

President Abdul Hamid went to Saudi Arabia on January 24 to pay last respect to late Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

Four suspected members of ISIS arrested²⁸

Bangladesh detectives arrested four suspected members of militant outfit ISIS, including its coordinator in Bangladesh, from Dhaka's Jatrabari on January 18.

NIA arrests four JMB members²⁹

India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) arrested four alleged members and recruiters of outlawed Jama'at-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) on January 28,

which is linked to the October 2 Burdwan blast. The four — Dalim Sheikh alias Fajjul Hoque Sheikh, Motiur Rehman alias Noor Alam, Habibur Rehman and Ghiyasuddin Munshi — were arrested in different areas of West Bengal and have been put on remand by a Kolkata court. With the latest arrests, the NIA has so far held 16 people including suspected mastermind Sajid, who is a Bangladeshi citizen, in connection with the blast.

Bangladeshi delegation visits Myanmar³⁰

Bangladesh sent a five-member delegation to Myanmar on January 30 to build trust between the two countries through economic cooperation, with special emphasis on the energy sector. During the five-day visit, the delegation, led by Prime Minister's Adviser for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, expressed the intention and make formal proposal to import gas through pipelines and 500 megawatts of hydropower from the Rakhine province of Myanmar.

Bhutan

Bhutan Prime Minister visits India³¹

Bhutan Prime Minister Lyonchhoen Tshering Tobgay made an official visit to India from January 10-18 on an invitation from the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi to attend the Vibrant Gujarat Summit 2015. During the visit, Tobgay visited the cities of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, New Delhi, Varanasi and Bodhgaya. In Ahmedabad, Lyonchhoen met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Gujarat's Chief Minister Anandiben Patel. On the sidelines of the Summit, Lyonchhoen met UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, Prime Minister of Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski, Australian Minister for Trade and Investment, Andrew Robb and Danish minister for Trade and Development Cooperation, Mogens Jensen and the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, members of the India Bhutan Friendship Association, and the Ambassador of European Union to Bhutan. In New Delhi, Lyonchhoen met the President of India at the Rashtrapati Bhavan and also met with the Vice President of India, ministers of external affairs, home, defence, finance, power, minister of State for Commerce and other senior officials. Addressing the Vibrant Gujarat summit, Lyonchhoen Tshering Tobgay said that Bhutan welcomed investments in renewable energy and hydropower, organic farming tourism, education and information technology. Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay, during his visit to Gujarat, sought Amul Dairy's expertise to source 2,000 cows from India. On behalf of the government and the people of India, the union minister of state for youth affairs, Sarbananda Sonowal, presented Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay with a Bodhi tree sapling at Bodhgaya. Receiving the sapling on behalf of the King and the people of Bhutan, Lyonchhoen said the sacred gift was very significant especially at a time when the people of Bhutan are celebrating the 60th birth anniversary of the Fourth Druk Gyalpo.

No construction of new religious structures³²

Construction of new religious structures, including lhakhangs, temples, *choekhangs*, *tshokhangs*, chortens, *tshamkhangs* and *drashas*, is frozen for the next two years. The home ministry issued a circular in December, notifying all ministries, dzongkhags, religious organisations, corporations, private agencies and individuals

not to accept applications for new constructions. The decision was made after the department of culture (DoC) faced difficulties in managing and maintaining the existing religious structures, which are more significant, when compared to the newly constructed ones.

External debt growing at 9.5 percent³³

Bhutan's stock of outstanding external debt saw an increase of 9.5 percent between June 2013 and June 2014. In three months, from June to September 2014, debt swelled to 108 percent from 101 percent of the GDP. In absolute terms, from US\$ 1.6 billion in June 2013, the total debt increased to US\$ 1.8 billion in 2014. The Royal Monetary Authority's (RMA) annual report revealed a growth of 10.6 percent in rupee debt, and 8.7 percent growth on debt pertaining to convertible currency. Rupee debt also constitutes 64 percent of the total debt, which grew from Rs 67.8 billion in June to Rs 74.9 billion in September last year, duration of three months. Hydropower loans now account for 83.4 percent of outstanding rupee loan as of June 2014, against about 70 percent in 2013. This was because rupee loan through the overdraft facility from State Bank of India (SBI) and Punjab National Bank (PNB), India has been either liquidated or not renewed.

Inflation drops by 0.5% in 2014³⁴

Bhutan's annual inflation in 2014 was at 8.27 percent, a drop by 0.5 percent from 2013. The year-on-year inflation in January last year climbed to 10 percent, which, by the yearend, slid to 6.38 percent. Director General of the National Statistical Bureau (NSB), Kuenga Tshering, said inflation is sometimes seasonal. For instance, the price of vegetable shoots up when the farming season is off. Another factor contributing to the inflation, he said, was the fuel price, which saw nine straight falls within a year.

Assistance sought from JICA³⁵

The government of Bhutan has requested the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for 400 power tillers to be delivered in a first batch, under its request for 1,450 of the machines made to the Japanese government. Agriculture Machinery Centre (AMC) programme director, Karma Thinlay, said that the request for a first batch of 400 power tillers, following the discontinuation of the KR-II grants that supplied Bhutan with power tillers, has been agreed to "in principle" by the Japanese side. It has been proposed that supply of the 1,450 power tillers be supplied in four batches of consecutive years, with 400 in the first, then 350, 300, and lastly, 400. The request for the 1,450 power tillers is yet to be officially accepted by the Japanese government. Meanwhile, the last batch of 239 power tillers being provided under the discontinued KR-II grant assistance, has arrived in the country. These 239 power tillers are likely to be distributed to locations where there are less numbers, like central and southern Bhutan.

Maldives

Defence Minister Nazim dismissed, Maj. Gen. Jaleel appointed as new Defence Minister³⁶

Mohamed Nazim has been dismissed from his post as Minister of Defence in relation to an ongoing investigation. According to the SunOnline police seized a pistol from Nazim's apartment following a raid on January 17. President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom appointed Major General (Retired) Moosa Ali Jaleel as the Minister of Defence and National Security on January 20, 2015. The appointment ceremony was held at the President's Office on January 20, 2015. Minister Moosa Ali Jaleel took the oath of office before the Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed.

Sri Lanka appreciates Maldives' decision to hand over prisoners³⁷

The Ministry of External Affairs of Sri Lanka has said that the Sri Lankan government was 'most appreciative' of the decision by President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, to hand over all Sri Lankan prisoners currently held in the Maldives to the Sri Lankan government. In a statement issued on January 7, the Sri Lankan External Affairs Ministry said that this gesture was in response to a request made on a humanitarian basis by former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa during a conversation with President Yameen.

President Gayoom congratulates Sirisena³⁸

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom sent a congratulatory message to the President-elect of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Maithiripala Sirisena, following his victory in the Presidential election. President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom also called up the President of Sri Lanka Maithiripala Sirisena on January 10 following his assumption of office. President Yameen and President Sirisena spoke on the importance of further strengthening the relations between the Maldives and Sri Lanka, noting the close bilateral relations between the two countries. The President of Sri Lanka said that the Maldives was one of the closest friends of Sri Lanka, and invited President Yameen to make an official visit at his earliest convenience. He also expressed his gratitude to President Yameen for the good wishes. President Sirisena assured President Yameen that he would give high priority to build on the existing relations between the two countries, during his tenure as President. Speaking in this regard, President Sirisena said that the good relations between the two countries must be maintained regardless of the administration in power.

Maldivian delegates visits Sri Lanka³⁹

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dunya Maumoon and Minister at the President's Office, Mohamed Hussain Shareef met with the new Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Ranil Wickremesinghe, as representatives of the Government of Maldives. At the meeting, the Sri Lankan Prime Minister expressed his firm commitment to promote Maldives-Sri Lanka ties, and assured of his continued support for Maldives at international forums. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe also agreed to make an official visit to the Maldives at an early mutually convenient time. At the meeting, discussions were held on the importance of strengthening people-to-people relations between the Maldives and Sri Lanka. The Prime Minister also confirmed that health and

education would be key areas of cooperation between the two countries. Further, he invited President Yameen to be the first Head of State to visit Sri Lanka under the new administration. President Sirisena also met with the Maldivian delegation in Sri Lanka. The delegates congratulated the new Sri Lankan President on behalf of the President and Government of Maldives. Discussions at the meeting were held on ways to further strengthen the existing relations between the two countries. At the meeting, the Sri Lankan President noted that this year marked the 50th anniversary of the Maldives' independence, as well as the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Maldives and Sri Lanka. He expressed his gratitude to the Maldivian delegation for being among the first foreign dignitaries to welcome the new Sri Lankan Government.

President appoints high commissioner to India, non-resident ambassador to UAE⁴⁰

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom has appointed Ahmed Mohamed as the High Commissioner of the Maldives to India, and Abdulla Hameed as the Non-Resident Ambassador of the Maldives to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The letters of appointment to the new High Commissioner and Non-Resident Ambassador were presented by President Yameen, at a ceremony held at the President's Office on January 6.

Thailand donates US\$ 50000 to Maldives⁴¹

Government of Thailand has donated US\$ 50,000 to the water fund opened regarding the fire incident occurred at Male' Water and Sewerage Company (MWSC) in December 2014. National News Bureau of Thailand has said that Thai Foreign Minister General Thanasak Patimaprakorn has handed over the donation to General Sanan Angubolkul Honoree Consul of Maldives in Thailand.

Maldives-Japan economic cooperation policy dialogue⁴²

Officials of Maldives and Japan have met for the Economic Co-operation Policy Dialogue. The meeting took place at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Malé on January 21. Ongoing projects were reviewed, and discussions were held at the meeting on ways of implementing projects and programs under Japanese Assistance. The Foreign Ministry said that the dialogue was headed by Foreign Secretary of Maldives Dr. Ali Naseer Mohamed, and Minister at the Embassy of Japan to the Maldives Asako Okai. Officials from Ministry of Finance and Treasury, Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, Ministry of Economic Development, Ministry of Environment and Energy, and Communications Authority of Maldives participated in the dialogue. Also, Deputy Head of Mission of the Japanese Embassy Asako Okai called on Minister of Foreign Affairs of Maldives Dunya Maumoon at the Foreign Ministry on January 21. At the meeting, Dunya highlighted the close bilateral relations between Maldives and Japan, and expressed confidence that the governments of both countries would work towards promoting economic cooperation. The meeting was also attended by Joint Secretary of Foreign Ministry Aishath Azeema.

Maldives assumes chairmanship of AOSIS⁴³

Maldives assumes the Chairmanship of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) on January 1, 2015. The Maldives spearheaded the efforts to form AOSIS, following the first ever Small States Conference held on Sea Level Rise, held in Maldives in November 1989. Since then Maldives, through national, regional and international efforts, has undertaken several initiatives and been an agent of change on a wide variety of issues related to climate change and environmental degradation. AOSIS is a coalition of small island and low-lying coastal countries that share similar development challenges and concerns about the environment, especially their vulnerability to the adverse effects of global climate change. It functions primarily as an ad hoc lobby and negotiating voice for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) within the United Nations system.

Deputy secretary general of the Muslim World League meets President Yameen⁴⁴

Deputy Secretary General of the Muslim World League, Dr. Adil bin Ali has paid a courtesy call on President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom on January 4 at the President's Office. President Yameen expressed his appreciation to Dr. Adil bin Ali for his visit to the Maldives. The President and the Deputy Secretary General discussed the efforts being made by the government in strengthening Islamic faith amongst the people. At the meeting, Dr. Adil bin Ali briefed President Yameen on the various programmes being conducted by the Muslim World League all over the world and enquired about the areas in which his organisation could provide assistance to the Maldives.

Vice President goes to Saudi Arabia to pay last respect to Saudi King⁴⁵

A high level delegation including Vice President Dr. Mohamed Jameel Ahmed has departed to Saudi Arabia on January 23 to pay respect and offer condolences to the government and people of Saudi Arabia, on the demise of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz and to extend congratulations to the new King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud. The Vice President was accompanied by Minister at the President's Office Abdulla Ameen and Minister of Islamic Affairs Dr. Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed.

7.1 percent rise in tourists arrival in the Maldives⁴⁶

According to Tourism Ministry, their target for the year 2014 was to bring 1.2 million tourists. However, 1.4 million tourists have visited Maldives by the end of 2014. That is a 7.1 percent rise when compared to tourist arrival in 2013. 1.2 million Tourists have visited Maldives in the year 2013. While more than 1.4 million tourists have visited Maldives last year, majority of the tourists have arrived in Maldives from Asia and Europe. According to the statistics of November 2014, most tourists have come to Maldives from China. President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayyoom has said that government aims to develop and widen the economy of the country and tourist arrival to Maldives can be made more than 1.2 million every year.

Nepal

Four Maldivians have gone to Syria to join in the civil war in Syria.⁴⁷

According to the SunOnline four Maldivians went to Syria through Turkey. All of them belong to the capital city, Male' and one of them had gone to Syria with his wife and infant of under one year old. Though they have entered Syria by crossing Turkey border, it has not been confirmed whether they have joined any group in Syria yet.

President Gayoom condemns Charlie Hebdo⁴⁸

In a statement issued by the President's Office on January 15, President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom condemned Charlie Hebdo for insulting Islam. The statement reads, "Freedom of expression is not a license to creating hatred, and promoting anti-Islamic sentiments and Islamophobia. Insulting the religious beliefs of one-third of humanity should not be tolerated in any society or by any Government. Instead such criminal activities should be stopped and actions should be taken in a speedy manner to prevent such activities." President Yameen stressed the importance of promoting a culture of respect and tolerance as a means of countering Islamophobia and radicalism.

CA failed to meet the deadline to promulgate the new constitution⁴⁹

The Constituent Assembly (CA) of Nepal failed to meet the deadline to promulgate the new constitution on January 22, 2015 as it could not resolve the disputed issues. Among the disputed issues ethnicity based federalism continues to dominate the discourse with members of Nepali Congress and CPN-UML categorically speaking against such federation. They are also averse to the idea of separating hill and Tarai as suggested by the Madhes-centric parties. They have pitched for breaking the five districts of Madhes that are at heart of dispute—Jhapa, Morang, Sunsari, Kailali and Kanchanpur. In this situations, the ruling parties' wanted to promulgate the new constitution through voting, but the 19-party block led by the UCPN (Maoist) has insisted on forging consensus on disputed issues.

UN under secretary general for political affairs visits Nepal⁵⁰

The UN Under Secretary General for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, has strongly encouraged the political leaders in Nepal to conclude the constitution drafting process through compromise, flexibility and inclusivity. Noting that there is no possibility of one hundred percent consensus, Feltman has said that the parties should try to forge a broad consensus. Feltman met with President Ram Baran Yadav, Prime Minister Sushil Koirala, CPN-UML Chairman K.P. Sharma Oli, UCPN (Maoist) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal, CA Chairman Subas Nembang, Foreign Minister Mahendra Bahadur Pandey and senior leaders from Madhes-based parties, among others.

Government briefs international community⁵¹

The government of Nepal has briefed the Kathmandu-based international community and some donor agencies on the latest situation in the Constituent Assembly (CA) and the constitution writing process. In a meeting on January 22, Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat and Minister for Foreign Affairs Mahendra Bahadur Pandey told foreign diplomats that the ruling parties would not wait any

more for consensus in statute drafting. The government side, in an implied way, sought the support of the international community for its “democratic efforts and process” in the CA towards preparing a draft of the new statute. Mahat said the ruling parties would follow the peaceful and democratic means outlined in the Interim Constitution to promulgate the new constitution. Dialogue and voting will go hand in hand “as we cannot wait indefinitely for consensus,” said Mahat.

Questionnaire committee formed by the Constituent Assembly⁵²

The questionnaire committee formed by Constituent Assembly Chairman Subash Nembang began its work without the participation of the opposition parties on January 31. The first meeting of the committee formed a seven-member sub-committee to form its working procedure. The sub-committee, coordinated by National Congress leader Ramesh Lekhak and Kiran Yadav, UML’s Bhanu Bhakta Dhakal and Shree Maya Thakali as its members. Likewise, Rastriya Prajatantra Party’s Deepak Bohora and Dilnath Giri and independent lawmaker Attar Kamaal Musalman are also the members of the sub-committee. Opposition parties have refused to be a part of the questionnaire committee, purported to resolve the disputed issues of the new constitution, as they blame the ruling parties of bypassing the oppositions by following the CA process and disregarding the spirit of consensus because of their numerical strength in the CA. Prime Minister Sushil Koirala meanwhile, has started holding one-on-one parleys with the opposition parties including UCPN (Maoist).

Nepal, India hold border consultation meeting⁵³

The security officials of Nepal and India held a meeting at Tapoban of Darchula district on January 24, discussing the strengthening of border security in face of growing cross-border crimes. The Indian officials were urged to advance the process of construction of a motorable and two suspension bridges the Indian government pledged earlier. The Nepal government has also called for Indian support in constructing a suspension bridge at Joljibi of Uku VDC as the construction works had stalled as the Indian side was yet to provide site for the construction. In response, Indian officials SDM of Pithauragadh, Abendra Kumar Pandey, said initiatives would be taken in this regard with the State and the Central government. Discussions were also held on the impending embankment on the bank of the Mahakali River. Both parties agreed to jointly address the issues if surfaced during the construction time. According to Mahendra Parsad Badu, the Chief at Mahakali River Control Project, Darchula, the Nepali officials turned down the request of Indian side to allow them a temporary road below the Ghattebagar to build another dam at Khotila in Dharchula, citing potential threat to Bangabagad area if any such construction takes place. Nepali party, however, agreed to help in the ferry of the construction material to the site by allowing the Nepal’s side road. Both the parties also agreed to cooperate to curb the cross border crimes occurring along the border areas.

Nepal to grow at 4.8 percent⁵⁴

The World Bank (WB) has projected Nepal’s economic growth at 4.8 percent for this fiscal year—far lower than the government’s six percent target. The report titled “Global Economic Prospects: Having Fiscal Space and Using It” has not

given explicit reasons for the lower growth forecast, but stated Nepal faces considerable challenges on the expenditure side. As of January 11, only 12 percent of the allocated capital budget has been spent, according to the Financial Comptroller General Office.

Road projects financed by India set to move ahead⁵⁵

The construction of eight road sections financed by India's second line of credit to Nepal is all set to get underway as India has given its no objection letter to the selection of contractors, officials at the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport said. According to the Physical Infrastructure Ministry, the contractors for these road projects had been selected more than six months ago, but they could not start work as they had to wait for the go-ahead from the Indian authorities. Among the road projects that have been cleared are Sanfebagar-Martadi, Bardaghat-Paldanda-Tribeni, Bharatpur-Meghauri, Janakpur Ring Road, Balaju Bypass-Ranipauwa (Nuwakot), Chhahare-Bidur, Kamal Binayak-Nagarkot and Ghorahi-Holeri known as Shahid Marg. A total of 11 road projects are being financed by the second line of credit extended to Nepal by India. The other three projects are Lamosanghu-Jiri, Balkhu-Dakshinkali and Lumbini Ring Road. The second line of credit worth \$250 million was approved during the then Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai's visit to India in 2011. The first credit line was worth \$100 million.

India 'willing' to build gas pipeline linking India and Nepal⁵⁶

The Indian government has said it is willing to build a gas pipeline linking India and Nepal in addition to the petroleum pipeline which it has recently agreed to construct. The proposed second pipeline will supply liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and natural gas. Indian Minister of State for Petroleum and Natural Gas Dharmendra Pradhan agreed to send an Indian technical team to Nepal to study the feasibility of laying an LPG and natural gas pipeline during a meeting with Nepali Minister for Commerce and Supplies Sunil Bahadur Thapa in New Delhi on January 19. Meanwhile, the Indian government has directed Indian Oil Corporation's (IOC) refinery in Barauni to increase the quota of LPG for Nepal. The refinery has been ordered to boost LPG supplies to 30,000 tonnes monthly from February. Nepal presently gets 22,000 tonnes of the cooking fuel per month.

Nepal-India joint working committee on tourism⁵⁷

The Tourism Ministry of Nepal said that a Nepal-India joint working committee would be formed to implement the agreements on tourism development signed between the two countries during the 18th SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu last November. The working committee will consist of tourism entrepreneurs from both the countries. During the SAARC meeting, Nepal and India had signed three twin-city agreements to link Janakpur and Ayodhya, Kathmandu and Varanasi and Lumbini and Bodh Gaya. Following the bilateral pact, Nepal and India have announced the establishment of twin-city relations and a daily bus service between Kathmandu and New Delhi has been started. Similarly, Indian tourists have been allowed to bring Indian currency of Rs 1,000 and Rs 500 denominations to Nepal.

Chief Election Commissioner of Nepal congratulates Sirisena⁵⁸

Chief Election Commissioner Neel Kantha Uprety, who is also the chairman of the Forum of the Election Management Bodies of South Asia, congratulated newly-elected Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena. President Sirisena met Uprety, who led the observers of the Forum and other election bodies in Sri Lanka, at Sri Lanka's Election Commission.

HRW expresses concerns on Nepal's lack of progress in war crimes prosecution⁵⁹

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has said that the Nepali political parties have failed to address the long overdue promise of justice and accountability in war crimes. In its World Report 2015, the New York-based human rights body said that the new coalition government of Nepali Congress and CPN-UML made no progress in these areas. The report mentioned that the transitional justice act that was formulated to investigate the cases of serious human rights violations largely replicates the provisions that were struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. HRW has also expressed deep concern that an estimated 4 million people in Nepal have been denied citizenship due to flawed laws.

Draft of Low Carbon Economic Development Strategy made public⁶⁰

The government of Nepal has made public a draft of Low Carbon Economic Development Strategy on January 27 that encompasses promotion and adoption of clean energy technologies to boost economic development in a sustainable manner. The strategy is a part of the government's continued efforts towards low-emission and climate-resilient economic growth through clean energy technologies such as hydropower and biogas, and help achieve the low-carbon development path. The Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (MoSTE) prepared the strategy under the Nepal Climate Change Support Programme (NCCSP) to make the country self-reliant on clean energy by 2022 and achieve high economic development through green technologies by 2030. The draft focuses on hydropower development as the backbone of the energy system to achieve sustainable economic growth in the long term. Since Nepal's contribution to the global greenhouse gas emission is negligible, there is no compulsion to reduce emissions under the United Nation's Framework Convention on Climate Change. The fossil fuel consumption, one of the key contributors to climate change, is only 12 percent of the total energy consumption in Nepal. Authorities, however, said actions are required to limit harmful emissions by promoting cleaner technologies as climate change is already impacting various sectors, including agriculture, energy, forests, biodiversity, tourism and physical infrastructures.

UNAIDS offers technical support to the ministry of health and population⁶¹

Under-Secretary General of the United Nations and UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé has offered strategic technical assistance to the Ministry of Health and Population in improving governance and technical competencies in areas it is lagging behind. He made such an offer during a meeting with Health and Population Secretary Shanta Bahadur Shrestha during the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok.

Pakistan

IFRC President visits Nepal⁶²

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) President Tadateru Konoé, who made a two-day visit to Kathmandu, paid a courtesy call on President Ram Baran Yadav on January 30. According to an IFRC statement, President Yadav and Tadateru discussed issues concerning disaster management that focused around risk reduction and disaster response. During the meeting, Tadateru said Nepal's prompt emergency response to last year's massive floods and severe landslides showed that these incidents can be managed domestically. Tadateru also welcomed the government's endorsement of a National Disaster Response Framework to facilitate preparedness planning and response. As part of its disaster preparedness plans, the Red Cross has warehouses with non-food relief items at regional and sub-regional levels. With 1.1 million members and 600 staffers, Nepal Red Cross is the largest humanitarian organisation in the country.

Sushma Swaraj rejects Sartaj's stand on border shootings⁶³

A day after India rejected Pakistani allegations that Border Security Force (BSF) had opened fire on Pakistan Rangers who had come for a flag meeting in the Jammu sector, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj sent a detailed letter to Sartaj Aziz on the events of December 31. Reportedly, in her written response Swaraj said that a BSF patrol had come under fire from a Pakistani border post in the area, which had resulted in the death of one Indian jawan, and serious injuries to another, and that had led to Indian troops opening "defensive fire". Pakistan on the other hand, had said that two Punjab Rangers had been shot in the Zafarwal sector on the Pakistani side, when they had been invited for a flag meeting to discuss ceasefire violations and Indian firing had prevented medical attention from reaching them, calling it a violation of international norms and a "cold blooded killing". In her response, Swaraj said "at no stage did the Indian side seek any platoon level contact under a white flag as was suggested in the communication". Swaraj also said that despite Indian messages "consistently" calling for firing to stop, Pakistani commanders continued to fire on Indian border posts. Pakistan had demanded an immediate inquiry into the incident and threatened that the incident would jeopardise the ceasefire at the LoC and International Border. In her response, Swaraj said India had "always adhered by the mechanisms that have been evolved to ensure peace and tranquillity on the International Border and Line of Control and would continue to do so.

Pakistan expresses concerns about India-US nuclear deal⁶⁴

Reacting to the India-US agreements on nuclear trade, Prime Minister's Adviser on National Security and Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz had voiced concern about the adverse impact of the accords on the region's strategic stability and deterrence and pledged to take all measures to safeguard national interests. The adviser said that the US ignored Pakistan's concerns conveyed before President Obama's visit to India. The Foreign Office (FO) in Islamabad on the other hand said that the Indo-US trade deal was a bilateral matter between the two countries.

No Kerry-Lugar fund for Pakistan since 2013: US⁶⁵

The United States said that no funds have been issued to Pakistan from the Kerry-Lugar-Berman provision since 2013. At a news briefing at the State Department, spokesperson Jen Psaki also rejected an Indian suggestion that it had issued a certification to Pakistan. The Ministry of Finance of the government of Pakistan announced in Islamabad that the US Congress had cleared an instalment of \$532 million of civilian aid to Pakistan from the Kerry-Lugar-Berman bill. "Congress has not been notified of a request, Congress has not approved a request," Psaki told the briefing when asked to comment on statements issued in Islamabad and New Delhi. She noted that some media reports had also suggested that an approval has been made in the past, which was incorrect, as no approval has been made from the Kerry-Lugar-Berman bill since 2013. An additional funding, however, could not be ruled out in future, she said, adding that there were other provisions, besides Kerry-Lugar-Berman, that were used for providing funds to Pakistan.

Nawaz Sharif's visit to Bahrain⁶⁶

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif led a delegation to Bahrain on two days official visit. Prime Minister Sharif, during one-to-one meeting with his Bahraini counterpart Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa, said the two countries shared common perceptions on many regional and international issues and enjoyed exemplary cooperation at the UN and other international forums. After the meeting the two prime ministers witnessed the signing of an agreement on exemption from short stay visa for holders of diplomatic and official passports. They also witnessed signing of five MoUs which were: between the University of Bahrain and Quaid-i-Azam University; between the Ministry of Industry and Commerce of Bahrain and Ministry of Commerce of Pakistan on cooperation in the field of small and medium enterprises development; in the field of culture and arts; in the field of education and higher education; and between Islamabad and Manama, the capital of Bahrain. Sharif also handed over to his Bahraini counterpart the instrument of ratification of an agreement for promotion and protection of investments.

The CENTCOM chief visits Pakistan⁶⁷

General Lloyd J. Austin Commander United States Central Command (CENTCOM) arrived in Pakistan on a two-day official visit to assess the latest security situation in the region in the wake of the December 16 Taliban attack on Peshawar's Army Public School, and to strengthen coordination between Pakistan and NATO forces in the post US drawdown situation in Afghanistan. The CENTCOM chief called on Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Raheel Sharif at the General Headquarters in Rawalpindi on January 12, according to an Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) press release. During the meeting, matters of mutual interest, including bilateral defence cooperation and the overall regional security situation with special emphasis on Afghanistan, came under discussion. The CENTCOM chief lauded the sacrifices rendered by the Pakistan Army in the war against terror and operational gains in Zarb-i-Azb, which has resulted in an effective degradation of terrorist networks. He also visited the Defence Ministry in Rawalpindi and held a meeting with Secretary Defence Lt. General (r) Alam Khattak.

Kerry visits Pakistan⁶⁸

US Secretary of State John Kerry came to Pakistan on a two-day official visit on January 12. John Kerry co-chaired the fifth edition of the ministerial level Strategic Dialogue with his Pakistani counterpart Sartaj Aziz. The Strategic Dialogue meeting covered most of the facets of bilateral relationship – trade, economic assistance, defence cooperation, energy and strategic issues, but the focus was pre-dominantly on counter-terrorism, specifically the progress made during the Zarb-i-Azb military operation in North Waziristan and the consensus that emerged in Pakistan after the December 16 Peshawar school carnage. During the visit, Kerry called on Chief of Army Staff Gen. Raheel Sharif at the latter's offices and discussed wide-ranging issues, including regional security and stability and Afghanistan.

Pakistan, Afghanistan deepening military ties⁶⁹

In a move towards improving border coordination and deepening military-to-military ties, Pakistan and Afghanistan opened a series of meetings of commanders. Peshawar Corps Commander Lt. General Hidayat ur Rehman travelled to Afghanistan on January 18 for the first meeting. General Rehman during the visit met the military commander of Afghanistan's eastern Nangrahar province that borders Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The meeting was also attended by representatives of Afghan Border Police and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The decision regarding meetings of commanders was taken during the last trilateral meeting on December 23 in Islamabad between Army Chief Gen Raheel Sharif, ANA Chief General Sher Muhammad Karimi and ISAF Commander General John Campbell. The two sides have been working on a border coordination mechanism to replace the existing procedure involving ISAF. Two border coordination points in Torkham and Spin Boldak have been reactivated.

Army Chief visits China⁷⁰

Army Chief General Raheel Sharif concluded his two-day China trip on January 26 by calling for greater international support for Pakistan to win its fight against terrorism. General Sharif visited China to meet civilian and political leadership for discussions on defence and security cooperation. During the visit, the Chinese leadership voiced strong support for Pakistan that has been battling militancy for over a decade. Military spokesman Major General Asim Bajwa said long-term defence collaboration, security and counter-terrorism cooperation, intelligence sharing, and training exchanges were agreed during the army chief's meetings in Beijing. The senior Chinese leaders, who met the army chief on the last day of his visit included Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and top political adviser Yu Zhengsheng.

US designates Fazlullah a global terrorist⁷¹

The US State Department has declared Mullah Fazlullah, chief of the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, a "specially designated global terrorist". The designation, which coincided with US Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Islamabad, will strengthen Pakistan's efforts to catch the fugitive TTP leader who is hiding in Afghanistan. On January 5, the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa government announced \$1 million bounty on Fazlullah.

Special courts formed to hear terrorism cases⁷²

Three special courts were formed in Peshawar, Lahore and Quetta on December 31 in accordance with the Protection of Pakistan Bill to preside over cases relating to terrorism. Five special courts are to be formed in total. The latest measures came days after the country's political leadership agreed to establish military courts in order to try terror suspects in what appeared to be a virtual bypassing of the superior judiciary and the Supreme Court's 1999 verdict which had declared such tribunals as unconstitutional. It moreover comes as Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has stated his resolve to go forward with the establishment of military courts come what may. Military courts have become a subject of controversy with certain political parties expressing reservations on their proposed establishment. During a meeting to review implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP) on January 13, the government decided to extend the scope of military courts to Gilgit-Baltistan and "Azad Jammu and Kashmir". Meanwhile, the government of Balochistan has selected 54 terrorism cases (19 related to the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Afghanistan, 18 to Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and 17 to Sipah-i-Muhammad) for trial by military courts set up under the 21st Constitution Amendment. The provincial apex committee, which is responsible for implementation of the National Action Programme against terrorism, will forward the cases to the federal government for a final decision.

Two countries seeking Lakhvi's custody: FIA⁷³

The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has informed the Islamabad High Court (IHC) that two countries whose citizens were killed in the Mumbai attacks have been seeking custody of Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, the alleged mastermind of the 2008 attacks. During the hearing of an appeal filed by the FIA against the post-arrest bail granted to Lakhvi, FIA's prosecutor Chaudhry Azhar requested an IHC division bench, comprising Justice Noorul Haq N. Qureshi and Justice Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui, for early decision on the appeal. Justice Siddiqui, however, remarked that if the government was in a hurry it could take the case to a military court. The bench observed that diplomatic affairs were a domain of the federal government and it would not affect the court's proceedings. According to media reports, the United States and the United Kingdom have written to the Pakistan government for custody of Lakhvi. On December 18, an anti-terrorism court of Islamabad granted post-arrest bail to Lakhvi in the Mumbai attacks case. However, the government detained him under the Maintenance of Public Order for one month. Following expiry of the period, the government extended the detention for another month. While hearing the FIA's bail cancellation application, the IHC bench remarked that at last hearing Lakhvi was issued notices for reply, but the court has not received the compliance report regarding the services of notices to the accused as yet. The IHC bench then re-issued notices to Lakhvi and directed the Superintendent of Adiala jail to submit compliance report.

Denmark gives US \$1.6 million for IDPs⁷⁴

Denmark has provided financial aid worth US \$1.6 million to the Pakistan government to assist the internally displaced persons (IDPs) of North Waziristan and Khyber Agency. The contribution, which has a special focus on women and

children, will be implemented through the UNHCR's operations in the area. Ambassador of Denmark Jesper Moller Sorensen said his country had been providing humanitarian support to Pakistan since 2005 with increased support during the earthquake and floods. Between 2010 and 2013, Denmark contributed a total of US \$51.5 million in humanitarian aid to Pakistan. In addition, Denmark is currently implementing a US \$50 million development assistance programme in Pakistan (2013-2016).

Pakistan hosts highest number of refugees: UN⁷⁵

Pakistan, which hosts about 1.6 million Afghan refugees, is the biggest host country in absolute terms, a UN refugee agency report said on January 7. Relative to the size of populations, Lebanon and Jordan host the largest number of refugees, while relative to the size of economy the burden carried by Ethiopia and Pakistan is greatest.

Foreign investment tripled⁷⁶

Foreign investment increased to \$1.657 billion in the first half of this fiscal year compared to \$522 million in the same period last year, but it was mostly because of debt securities. According to a State Bank report, overall foreign investment, including debt securities, increased by 217 per cent in the July-Dec period of 2014-15.

PM Nawaz leaves for funeral of Saudi King Shah Abdullah⁷⁷

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif went to Riyadh to attend late Saudi King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz's funeral. President Mamnoon Hussain had expressed heartfelt condolences over the demise of the Saudi king and had termed it a big loss for the Ummah. In a condolence message, PM Nawaz expressed grief and sorrow over the King's demise, saying that being the custodian of the Holy Mosques he had a special place in the heart of every Pakistani.

23 religious seminaries are receiving foreign funding⁷⁸

The Senate was informed on January 30 that only 23 religious seminaries in Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan were receiving foreign funding. Minister of State for Interior Baleeghur Rahman told the upper house that according to information received from provincial governments so far, as many as 12 madressahs in KP were receiving funding from various sources in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Similarly, nine madressahs in Balochistan and two in Sindh were also receiving foreign funding. He said that the seminaries were registered under various laws, including the Companies Ordinance 1984, Trust Act 1882, Societies' Registration Act 1860, Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies (registration and control) Ordinance 1961, Charitable And Religious Trust Act 1920, Musalmaan Waqf Act 1913, and the Charitable Endowments Act. Enforcement of these laws has been devolved to the provinces following the 18th Amendment, he said, adding that there was sufficient control and vigilance within these laws to monitor the working of seminaries, including keeping a check on their financial sources and conducting audits.

Sri Lanka

Maithripala Sirisena takes oaths as the sixth President of Sri Lanka⁷⁹

Election Commissioner Mahinda Deshapriya officially declared Maithripala Sirisena as the new President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka on January 9. Sirisena obtained a majority of 51.28% votes in the Presidential elections held on January 8. Maithripala Sirisena took oaths as the sixth President of Sri Lanka on January 9 in front of Justice K. Sripavan. United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe also took oaths as the Prime Minister on the same day.

World leaders congratulate Sirisena⁸⁰

World leaders including US President Barack Obama, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, British Prime Minister David Cameron, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Singapore President Tony Tan, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma congratulated Sri Lanka's new president on his election win.

New Cabinet formed⁸¹

The new cabinet of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, took oaths at the Presidential Secretariat on January 12. A 27 member cabinet took oaths before the President while Ministers of State and Deputy Ministers also took oaths. In the new cabinet, President Maithripala Sirisena holds the post of Defence Minister while Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe holds the posts of Minister of Policy Development and Economic Development. Mangala Samaraweera was appointed as the External Affairs Minister and Ravi Karunanayake as the Finance Minister. President Maithripala Sirisena said that the new cabinet will be in place only for 100 days, after which Parliament elections will be held.

SLFP appoints new opposition leader and opposition whip⁸²

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) appointed Nimal Siripala de Silva as the new opposition leader while John Seniviratne was made the Chief Opposition Whip. The appointments were made at the SLFP Parliamentary Group meeting in Colombo on January 16. Meanwhile the United National Party (UNP) has appointed Lakshman Kiriella the Leader of the House and Gayantha Karunathilake the Chief Government Whip.

Modi writes to Wickremesinghe⁸³

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulating his Sri Lankan counterpart, Ranil Wickremesinghe says the new Prime Minister's experience will be invaluable in guiding the destiny of Sri Lanka. "The rich experience you will bring to bear in discharging the responsibilities of this august office will be invaluable in guiding the destiny of Sri Lanka at this crucial juncture," Modi wrote in a letter to Wickremesinghe, which was made public on January 15.

MEA of India denies Reuter's report⁸⁴

According to a Reuters report, Sri Lanka expelled the Colombo station chief of India's spy agency in the run-up to presidential election. According to the report,

the RAW agent was recalled after complaints that he had worked with Sri Lanka's opposition parties to agree on a joint contender for the election. Then, he was accused of facilitating meetings to encourage several lawmakers, among them Sirisena, to defect from Rajapaksa's party. Denying the Reuters report, Indian Ministry of External Affairs' spokesman said that transfers were routine decisions.

Pope Francis visits Sri Lanka⁸⁵

Pope Francis came to Sri Lanka on January 13 on three day visit. During the visit, Pope Francis canonized Blessed Joseph Vaz, the first Saint of Sri Lanka at the Holy Mass held at the Galle Face Green, Colombo on January 14. Pope Francis also addressed around 500,000 faithful at the Madhu Church in Mannar.

Ban-Ki Moon talks to Sirisena⁸⁶

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has telephoned President Maithripala Sirisena and discussed Sri Lanka's post-war agenda. The UN Headquarters said that the Secretary-General and President Sirisena had also discussed the President's 100-day plan.

Sri Lanka to review Chinese constructed port deal⁸⁷

Sri Lanka's new government said it will review a billion dollar port deal with China Communications Construction Co. Ltd. over concerns about the Chinese company getting land on a freehold basis in a high security zone. Under the proposed \$1.5 deal, 108 hectares of land will be given to the Chinese firm to cover its investment costs, including 20 hectares on an outright basis and the rest on a 99-year lease. However, Sri Lanka's new government will continue to develop the strategic partnership with China. President Maithripala Sirisena has given this assurance when the Chinese Ambassador to Colombo Wu Jianghao called on the President on January 15 at the President's House. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said on January 19 that it hoped for continued "cooperation" with Sri Lanka despite a pledge by the new government in Colombo to review Chinese infrastructure projects awarded under the previous administration. The remarks by China's Foreign Ministry came two days after a junior Sri Lankan minister said President Maithripala Sirisena's government would look at benchmarks for Chinese infrastructure costs using independent audit firms.

External affairs minister of Sri Lanka visits India⁸⁸

External Affairs Minister of Sri Lanka Mangala Samaraweera made a three day visit to India on January 17, 2015. He met his Indian counterpart Sushma Swaraj, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and National Security advisor Ajit Doval, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress President Sonia Gandhi during the visit. During his discussions with Sushma Swaraj, both the leaders discussed the issue of repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees living in India, fishermen issue, Indian development projects in Sri Lanka and economic issues. Both the leaders also agreed to hold a joint commission meeting this year. Minister Samaraweera met Prime Minister Modi on January 19.

India and Sri Lanka released fishermen detained in each other's jails⁸⁹

Sri Lanka has released all Indian fishermen jailed in the country on January 16 ahead of the new Foreign Minister's visit to New Delhi. Sri Lanka's External Affairs Ministry said the release of the Indian fishermen's boats would also be "favourably considered". Sri Lanka and India exchanged the fishermen who were detained in each other's jails on January 21. The first such exchange in this year after the new Sri Lankan government is installed in Colombo, took place at the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) off Kankasanthurai, Sri Lanka. Indian Coastguard ship ICGS Rajdhvaj handed over 10 Sri Lankan fishermen along with two fishing boats at the IMBL to Sri Lanka Coast Guard and Sri Lankan authorities handed over 15 Indian fishermen in exchange. According to the ministry of external affairs spokesman during 2014, Indian Coast Guard had repatriated 1,112 Indian fishermen with 165 fishing boats and 423 Sri Lankans with 60 fishing boats.

Iran seeks expansion of bilateral relations with Sri Lanka⁹⁰

In a message addressed to President Maithripala Sirisena, Iranian President Rouhani congratulated him on winning the election and expressed hope for expansion of bilateral ties more than ever before, Iran's official news agency IRNA said in a release.

Pakistan's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka meets Prime Minister⁹¹

Sri Lanka is committed to further strengthen the relationship with Pakistan, Sri Lanka's new Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has assured when Pakistan's High Commissioner Major General (R) Qasim Qureshi called on him at Temple Trees on January 19, 2015. The Prime Minister and the High Commissioner exchanged views on further promoting bilateral ties between the two countries during the meeting.

Finance Minister of Fiji meets Samaraweera⁹²

Finance Minister of Fiji Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum has extended an invitation to Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera on January 22 to visit the country and further strengthen relations. He met with Samaraweera to discuss issues that will lead to improved bilateral relations between the two countries.

Seychelles to assist MR probe⁹³

In responding to allegations made in a Sri Lankan media about speculation concerning assets held in Seychelles by the former President of Sri Lanka, the Seychelles Government has reiterated that it has nothing to hide and has said that if the Sri Lankan Government undertakes an investigation, it is open to assist in the framework of treaties that are in force between the two countries. Seychelles Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jean-Paul Adam, has emphasised that the partnership between the two countries is one which goes 'beyond politics.'

EU housing project for displaced people in the north and the east⁹⁴

The European Union (EU) has initiated a programme for a housing project to resettle people displaced in the North and East and provide them with necessary

facilities. The programme will grant Euro 14 million for an indicative 3,000 incremental owner driven houses, supporting also livelihood measures such as community infrastructure, also through securing land tenure, facilitating grievances mechanisms, improving the local construction supply chain. Manager of the Infrastructure and Reconstruction programme of the delegation of the European Union to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, Jaime Royo-Olid and Libuse Soukupova of International Cooperation and Development of EU disclosed the EU assistance during a meeting with the Sri Lankan Minister of Resettlement, Reconstruction and Hindu Religious Affairs D. M. Swaminathan on January 23, 2015.

Japan to assist in the expansion of the Bandaranaike International Airport⁹⁵

The State Minister of Civil Aviation Faizer Mustapha said that the Japanese government has expressed willingness to continue to support the second stage of the expansion of the Bandaranaike International Airport at Katunayake. Following a meeting with the Minister on January 23, the Ambassador of Japan in Sri Lanka Nobuhito Hobo has assured to continue supporting the infrastructure project uninterrupted. Sri Lanka in 2013 signed a Rs. 42.5 billion loan agreement with Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA) to finance the expansion of the Bandaranaike International Airport and future developments. Under the Development Project Phase II Stage 2 work will be carried out to expand the terminal building, aircraft parking apron, and public utilities.

Shirani Bandaranayake resumed duties as Chief Justice for one day⁹⁶

Dr. Shirani Bandaranayake, who was impeached during Mahinda Rajapaksa's Presidency, resumed duties as the Sri Lanka's Chief Justice on January 28, following marching orders issued on Mohan Peiris, who was appointed as the country's 44th Chief Justice by Mahinda Rajapaksa. Bandaranayake however, tendered her resignation on January 29. Justice K. Sripavan took oaths as the new Chief Justice before President Maithripala Sirisena on January 30.

Indian deputy high commissioner meets minister of industry and commerce⁹⁷

There is no change whatsoever in Sri Lanka's international or domestic trade positioning due to the arrival of new government, rather, it stands strengthened even more. Minister of Industry and Commerce Rishad Bathiudeen gave this assurance to the Deputy High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka Arindam Bagchi when the latter made a courtesy call on Minister Bathiudeen on January 27 at the ministry.

Samaraweera concludes his official visit to Brussels⁹⁸

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mangala Samaraweera, concluded a two day official visit to Brussels on January 29. During the visit, Foreign Minister Samaraweera met Belgian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Didier Reynders and members of the European Parliament. He also held talks with the European Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Karmenu Vella, and the European Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica. Discussions with these leaders focused on strengthening Sri Lanka's relations with the European Union and Belgium, the steps Sri Lanka has taken

and will take to comply with international fishing regulations and the process of re-qualifying for GSP+ tariff concessions. During the fruitful meetings the European Commission offered Sri Lanka assistance in meeting the regulatory requirements that would enable an early lifting of the ban on fish exports to the EU and displayed strong interest in expanding socio-economic ties and development programmes.

Dhanapala meets UN High Commissioner for Human Rights⁹⁹

Jayantha Dhanapala, Senior Advisor on Foreign Affairs to President Maithripala Sirisena, met the High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein in Geneva on January 29, and briefed him on the policies of the newly elected government. The meeting in Geneva comes as Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein prepares to submit to the UN Human Rights Council, in March, a report based on a UN-led investigation on the war in Sri Lanka.

British Foreign Office Minister Hugo Swire meets Wigneswaran¹⁰⁰

Northern Province Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran and British Foreign Office Minister Hugo Swire met in Jaffna on January 29 and discussed the situation in the north. Wigneswaran and Swire had also discussed the March session of the UN Human Rights Council where a report on Sri Lanka is to be submitted.

Finance Minister presents Interim budget 2015¹⁰¹

The new government of Sri Lanka presented the Interim Budget 2015 in Parliament. The Interim Budget proposes increasing salaries of state sector employees by Rs. 10,000. Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake said that although pledged to reduce the prices of ten essential items at the presidential election, the prices of 13 essential food items have been reduced. Taxes have been imposed on liquor outlets and bars, distilleries, mobile telephone service providers, TV channels telecasting sports and casinos. Sri Lanka's Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) says the interim budget presented by the new government lacked short and long term economic strategies.

India-Sri Lanka talk on repatriation of refugees¹⁰²

India-Sri Lanka held talks on voluntary repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees in the country on January 30. During the first meeting between the officials of the two countries, in which Indian side was led by the Joint Secretary in-charge of Lanka in the External Affairs Ministry, the two sides talked about various aspects related to repatriation. Reportedly, there were also internal consultations on the issue with other ministries in the government.

Lanka tourist arrivals exceed 1.5 million in 2014¹⁰³

Statistics released by Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) showed that Sri Lanka had met its tourist arrival target of 1.5 million for the year 2014. According to SLTDA figures, Sri Lanka's tourist arrivals rose 16.1 percent in December 2014 compared to the same period in 2013 with the arrival of 178,672 tourists compared to the 153,918 arrived in December 2013. For the year a total of 1,527,153 tourists arrived in the island recording a 19.8 percent increase from the 1,274,593 came during 2013.

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