

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

37th session of the SAARC Council of Ministers, 42nd session of the SAARC standing committee and the 52nd session of the SAARC programming committee were held in Pokhara, Nepal on March 14-16, 2016, as part of the SAARC inter-summit sessions. Foreign ministers of all the South Asian countries attended the Council of Ministers meeting which endorsed several proposals such as, SAARC summit will be held in every alternate November; Amjad Hussain B. Sial as the next secretary general of SAARC; establishment of SAARC disaster management centre in Delhi and centre overseeing environmental issues in Pakistan; amendment to the SAARC Development Fund Charter etc. Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Nepal Kamal Thapa, who chaired the session, called the event a "grand success". However, analysts are not very satisfied with the outcome of the meeting. Deliberations were held over 32 agenda items during the two days, but the council of ministers could come to consensus to endorse only a few of them.

The leaders of the member countries held several formal and informal meetings on the sidelines of the summit, where they discussed their bilateral issues with each other. It is rightly believed that the SAARC faces setback due to the bilateral problems between India and Pakistan.

Nonetheless, there are problems and issues between other regional members too. This issue of the South Asia Trends highlights the major developments in the area of domestic politics, economics and international affairs of the South Asian countries (excluding India) in the month of March. The issue will give a glimpse of the complex relations that exist among the countries in the region.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan, India sign MoUs¹

India and Afghanistan signed 92 more people-centric projects designed to improve the lives of the hard working and determined citizens across Afghanistan on March 9, 2016. At a ceremony presided over by Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dr. Abdullah Abdullah at Sapedar Palace, tripartite agreements were signed between Government of India, Ministry of Economy and various implementing Ministries including Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock; Education; Higher Education; Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs & Disabled; Public Health; Public Works; Refugees & Repatriation; Rural Rehabilitation & Development; Water & Energy, Women Affairs, IDLG & General Directorate of Physical Education, for additional 92 projects worth US\$ 19.24 million. Another 87 projects worth US\$ 25 million are under process of approval by Government of India. "It is expected that these projects would also commence in the near future", a press statement from Indian Embassy in Kabul stated.

Afghanistan welcomes India's decision to invest in Chabahar²

Afghanistan Ministry of Commerce and Industries spokesman Mosafer Ghughandi welcomed India's \$156 million-investment decision to develop Chabahar and regarded it as profitable for India. He also said that Afghanistan would also take advantage of India's investment in Chabahar.

President Ghani launches G7+ Summit in Kabul³

President Ashraf Ghani officially opened the 4th G7+ ministerial meeting in Kabul on March 23, 2016 and said Afghanistan has made enormous strides over the past 15 years with the help of the international community. The two-day summit in Kabul, drew high-ranking delegates from G7+ countries along with some development partners. The meeting reviewed progress made since the previous ministerial meeting held in Lome, Togo in 2014 and also agreed on a strategic roadmap for the year 2016 -2017.

National Security Council stresses on Russian cooperation with Afghanistan⁴

The Afghanistan National Security Council said Russian cooperation and military assistance could play a crucial role in the ongoing anti-terrorism efforts. During a meeting between Russian ambassador Alexander Mantytskiy and National Security Advisor Mohamamd Hanif Atmar on March 18, both sides talked on Russian cooperation with Afghanistan and agenda of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) conference, a statement from the council, said. In addition to the assistances of neighbouring countries, Afghanistan needed the cooperation of Russia for anti-terrorism efforts, Atmar said adding the continued aids of Russia for equipping Afghan security personnel were vital for the fight. Ambassador Mantytskiy said his country would help Afghanistan in counter-terrorism fight, maintaining peace and stability and would support the policies of Afghan Government.

Pakistan violated Afghan border 56 times in three months: Afghan envoy⁵

Afghanistan told the UN Security Council on March 15, 2016 that Pakistan had violated its territorial integrity and sovereignty at least 56 times by crossing the

Durand Line in the last three months. The violations would further jeopardise the relationship between the neighbours, Afghanistan's top diplomat at the United Nations told members of the Security Council. In her address to the Security Council, Pakistan Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi, on the other hand alleged, "there are incursions by TTP terrorists across the international border from Afghanistan. Pakistan has called repeatedly for cooperation to monitor and control the border. Kabul has not been forthcoming so far."

Iran to launch industrial production lines in Afghanistan⁶

Iranian Minister of Industry, Mines, and Trade Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh said the Islamic Republic is seeking to boost industrial cooperation with neighbouring Afghanistan in the near future. "Our country plans to launch its production lines in small and medium industries in Afghanistan," Nematzadeh said on March 2, 2016 at the opening ceremony of Iran's third specialised exhibition in the Afghan capital of Kabul. Earlier, Deputy Minister of Industry, Mines, and Trade Mojtaba Khosrotaj described the Afghan market as "strategic" for Iranian merchants. Iran and Afghanistan signed a memorandum of understanding in the field of exploitation and exploration of mines in Afghanistan. The MoU was signed in the course of a meeting between Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade Mohamamd Reza Nematzadeh and Minister of Mines and Petroleum of Afghanistan Dawood Shah Saba.

President Ghani endorses China-proposed alliance against terror⁷

President Ashraf Ghani has endorsed a Chinese proposal for a four-nation alliance against terrorism, a top presidential aide said in an interview on March 2, 2016. The suggestion was floated by China's military chief Gen. Fang Fenghui during his trip to Kabul, where he held a series of meetings with top Afghan leaders. Gen. Fenghui suggested China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan -all sharing borders with the western regions of China - should forge a coalition against the scourge. With links to regional insurgent outfits, the Uighur ethnic group in western China has been a major security concern for Beijing. President Ghani's deputy spokesman told the Voice of America that Gen. Fenghui had urged Afghanistan to join the anti-terrorism mechanism. President Ghani has reportedly endorsed the proposal.

Afghanistan and China preparing to sign silk road accord⁸

Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan Yao Jing on March 24, 2016 asked the Afghan Government to finalise the draft agreement on the Silk Road project and hand it over to his country for a review. The agreement after being finalised by both the countries would be signed during Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abullah's visit to China. A statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) said the Chinese envoy met with Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani. The envoy assured his country was ready to host CEO Abdullah on his official visit and hoped the agreement would be signed soon between the two countries. Ambassador Jing also extended invitation to Rabbani to attend the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) scheduled for late April, 2016. Rabbani assured that work on finalising the Silk Road project agreement was underway in coordination with the ministries concerned and it would be completed and shared with China in the near future.

Japan contributes \$21.3 to Afghan emergency assistance⁹

The government of Japan announced on March 24 that it would provide \$21.3 million to different international agencies for humanitarian and emergency assistance in Afghanistan. The funding will allow the agencies, including UNHCR, UNICEF, UNMAS, WFP and IOM, to address humanitarian challenges through provision of vital support to refugees returning from Pakistan and Iran. The UNHCR has been given \$4,000,000 to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees from Iran and Pakistan, foster sustainable reintegration of returnees and deliver assistance to refugees in south-eastern Afghanistan. US\$ 2,300,000 from the Government of Japan will enable UNICEF to provide water, sanitation and hygiene services to nearly 20,000 individuals who have been affected by conflict or natural disaster. US\$ 2,000,000 United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) from the Government of Japan will support demining activities in Kandahar, Kunduz, and Farah provinces, where many communities remain affected by landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW). Similarly, WFP has received \$8,000,000 for addressing the issue of food insecurity and malnutrition and providing humanitarian air services. IOM has been given \$5,000,000 to help provide humanitarian assistance to 26,720 highly vulnerable undocumented Afghan returnees from Pakistan and Iran.

U.S. commander apologises for hospital bombing in Afghanistan¹⁰

The new commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan General John W. Nicholson apologised for the American bombing of a hospital last year that killed 42 people and wounded 37 more. Nicholson met family members of victims and the staff of the now-closed Medecins Sans Frontieres hospital in Kunduz, which was captured by Taliban insurgents for several days last year, to express his condolences. "As commander, I wanted to come to Kunduz personally and stand before the families, and people of Kunduz, to deeply apologise for the events that led to the bombing", Nicholson said.

AAF receives four more attack aircraft¹¹

The Afghan Air Force (AAF) received additional four light attack aircraft from United States which comes amid ongoing efforts to bolster the capabilities of the Afghan air power. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) said the light attack aircraft, A-29 Super Tucanos, arrived in Afghanistan on March 30, 2016 with the latest deliveries increasing the number of A-29s to eight. Meanwhile, 20 Afghan military students were sent to United States for trainings in aviation sector recently. Reportedly, "one of them will be trained at the Ordnance Basic Officer Leadership Course, three will be trained as A-29 aviators for the Afghan Air Force, eight as A-29 mechanics and nine as C-130 mechanics."

Reforms hold key to Afghanistan's success: NATO Chief¹²

The NATO Chief Jens Stoltenberg and NATO Military Committee Chairman Gen. Petr Pavel visited Kabul on March 15, 2016. During discussions with President Ashraf Ghani, Jens Stoltenberg said, Afghanistan's long-term success required sweeping reforms.

EU launches seven week anti-graft drive in Afghanistan¹³

The European Union (EU) delegation in Afghanistan announced the launch of a seven-week campaign against corruption in the war-torn country on March 12, 2016. The campaign, which will culminate in a high-level conference in early May, will help the Afghans combat graft and seek to mobilise support for government action against the scourge. In a statement, the EU Delegation said Afghanistan's endemic corruption was crippling the economy, undermining the fight against the insurgency and threatening past achievements and investments. The campaign will focus on four themes: corruption and peace; corruption in the judicial sector; natural resources and stability – the threat of illegal mining; and public action against graft.

UNSC extends UNAMA mandate for a year¹⁴

The United Nations Security Council unanimously extended its mission in Afghanistan for another year on March 15, 2016. As a result, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) will be in the country at least till March 17, 2017, unless further extended.

Afghanistan to consult Pakistan's key allies amid deadlock in peace talks¹⁵

The Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) announced on March 28, 2016 that government is thinking about consulting the U.S and China on the peace process after Islamabad failed to deliver on its promises to bring the Taliban to the table of negotiation. The much-awaited process hit a deadlock since February after the Taliban leadership refused to attend the negotiating tables unless certain preconditions were met by the Afghan Government. As preparations for peace talks are moving into top gear, President Ashraf Ghani has reportedly spurned Taliban's demand for the installation of an interim government in Kabul. However, President Ghani was ready to accommodate Taliban's demands if the group dropped preconditions for direct talks, the presidential advisor on peace affairs said in an interview.

Taliban show readiness for prisoner swap¹⁶

Taliban said on March 23, 2016 that they are willing to start the process of swapping prisoners with Afghan Government. A statement released by the group, undersigned by one of its spokesperson Qari Mohammad Yousuf Ahmadi, states that they have prepared a mechanism which could be applied through a commission in an environment of confidence. The statement further states that Taliban have also talked to a number of neutral organisations and informed them about their readiness for the prisoner swap. According to the press release, Taliban showed willingness to exchange soldiers detained after their helicopter crashed in northern Faryab province on November 24, 2015 but were not given a green light by the other side (government). The helicopter made an emergency landing after experiencing a technical error in Pashtun Kot district of Faryab province that is partly controlled by Taliban. Reports surfaced then suggested that the militant group seized over a dozen soldiers. Government is yet to release information about fate of the hostages.

Bangladesh

53 militants join peace process¹⁷

At least 53 militants, including ten Islamic State (IS) fighters, have shunned the insurgency and joined the peace process in the Shinwari district of eastern Nangarhar province, officials said on March 27, 2016. They handed over 43 weapons to the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG).

Over 600 Afghans killed by IS militants in six months: MoD¹⁸

The Afghan Ministry of Defence in a report said more than 600 civilians have been killed over the past six months at the hands of Daesh terrorists, who are trying to strengthen their foothold in the militancy-riddled country. The Afghan Defence Ministry released the figure in a report on March 15 and said most of the victims were young people who had refused to join the ranks of the terror group mainly operating in eastern Afghanistan. Daesh atrocities have also rendered 20,000 families internally displaced over the past year, it added.

Turkey returns dozens of refugees to Afghanistan hours after EU deal: AI¹⁹

Turkey's forcible return of around 30 Afghan asylum seekers just hours after the European Union (EU)-Turkey refugee deal came into force, Amnesty International (AI) said. The organisation claims that it has received credible information indicating that Turkey violated European and international law by forcibly returning the asylum-seekers, who fear attacks by the Taliban, to Kabul without granting them access to an asylum procedure.

Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmud Ali visits India²⁰

Foreign Minister of Bangladesh A.H. Mahmud Ali made a two-day visit to India to attend the *Raisina Dialogue* organised by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi.

Deal for US \$2 billion Indian credit line signed²¹

Bangladesh signed an agreement with the Exim Bank of India for US \$2 billion in low-cost loans for more than a dozen social and development projects on March 9, 2016. The funds will be used for 14 projects in railway, road transport, power, education, vocational training, health, ICT, shipping, and economic zones. The credit carries one per cent interest rate with a repayment period of 20 years and a grace period of five years.

India flags off 2,200 tonnes of diesel to Bangladesh²²

Dharmendra Pradhan, Minister (independent charge) for Petroleum and Natural Gas of India, flags off a train carrying 2,200 tonnes of gas oil to Bangladesh from Siliguri on March 17, 2016. Numaligarh Refinery Ltd (NRL) of India, a subsidiary of state-run Bharat Petroleum Corporation, is supplying the gas oil. Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) will pay a premium of \$7 per barrel to Bharat Petroleum, whereas it pays US \$4.5 to international suppliers, according to Mosleh Uddin, director of operations and planning at the BPC. From this consideration, the price will be higher. But international suppliers are only liable to bring the petroleum products up to Chittagong Port, leaving the BPC to bear transport costs to distribute it to different parts of the country. That overall transport cost will go

down if a significant amount of diesel could be supplied from Parbatipur, said Mosleh Uddin.

The supply of 10GBps broadband internet from Bangladesh to India launched²³

Dhaka and New Delhi officially inaugurated the supply of 10GBps broadband internet from Bangladesh to India and 100MW power from India to Bangladesh on March 23, 2016. The launch was done through a video conference. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi termed it a significant day, and said relations between the two neighbours have reached a new height to promote each other's development.

BGB-BSF joint exercise in Sundarbans²⁴

The Indian Border Security Force (BSF) and the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) conducted a three-day joint exercise along the international border in the Sundarbans area on March 12-14, 2016. Officials said a company-level (about 100 personnel) strength of the BSF and the BGB each along with their equipment, floating border posts and patrol boats took part in the exercise. The two forces will undertake joint "long range" patrolling on mechanised vessels, mutual checking of cargo vessels deep inside border areas before they go in international waters, and exchange common information and communication. A decision to hold such an exercise was made during the director general-level talks between the two sides in Dhaka in December 2014.

India extends greetings to Bangladesh on its 46th Independence Day²⁵

India extended greetings marking Bangladesh's 46th Independence and National Day on March 26 and expressed confidence that relations between the two countries would scale new heights. President Pranab Mukherjee in a message to his Bangladeshi counterpart Abdul Hamid, said, "on behalf of the government, the people of India and on my own behalf, it gives me immense pleasure to extend warm felicitations and best wishes to you and to the people of Bangladesh on the occasion of your National Day." In a Twitter post, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "Independence Day greetings to the people of Bangladesh. We cherish our long-standing ties and i am sure our relations will grow even further."

UK parliamentary group lauds progress of Bangladesh²⁶

Bangladesh received a high appreciation from the UK All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for its commendable successes in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), poverty reduction, women empowerment, and transformation of its economy in the recent years. APPG met on February 29, 2016 at the UK Houses of Parliament. Chair of APPG, Anne Main, presided over the meeting, which was attended by Desmond Swayne, Minister of State for International Development, Baroness Shreela Flather and Jim Fitzpatrick MP, Paul Scully MP, Rupa Huq MP and Bangladesh High Commissioner in London Md Abdul Hannan among others. Desmond Swayne admired Bangladesh garment sectors' remarkable transformation from low to high-value end products. Baroness Flather praised the Bangladesh Government for creating jobs for millions of women in these sectors, which impacted positively on addressing other social challenges

like child marriage. Bangladesh High Commissioner briefed the meeting on the socio-economic developments of Bangladesh under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

UK bars direct air cargo from Dhaka²⁷

The UK has banned air cargo directly from Dhaka until further notice as Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport failed to meet some international security requirements. Only the Biman Bangladesh Airlines carries cargo directly to the UK in its four weekly passenger flights but it now would not be able to do so due to the ban, according to officials of the national flag carrier. An average of 25 tonnes of cargo - mostly apparels, vegetables and agricultural products - is flown to the UK in each flight. "The ban will have a disastrous impact on our exports as the UK is a very big market of the EU. The UK is the second biggest garment export destination for Bangladesh after Germany", said Siddiqur Rahman, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association. A web post on the UK government's website on March 8 says, "As part of a set of interim measures, cargo will not be allowed on direct flights from Dhaka to the UK until further notice." Earlier on December 19, 2015, Australia banned air cargo from Bangladesh, citing security concerns.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir visits Bangladesh²⁸

During a meeting of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with Saudi Foreign Minister Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir in Dhaka on March 8, 2016, it was made clear that Bangladesh would not participate in any military operation in any part of the world if not mandated by the UNSC. Prime Minister Hasina, however, gave a positive response regarding extending support to the Arab country in countering terrorism and religious extremism. She welcomed the Saudi initiative to form a 34-nation coalition of like-minded Islamic countries to fight terrorism but at the same time cited the government's policy that requires UN approval for its participation in any military operation of the alliance. The Saudi foreign minister paid the visit to Dhaka reportedly to know how Bangladesh could militarily assist the Middle Eastern country. At the meeting, Hasina told the Saudi minister that her country joined the Saudi-led Islamic Alliance (Dhaka calls it "Counter-Terrorism Centre") along with other Muslim countries as per its "zero tolerance" policy to fight terrorism and extremist ideology. The Saudi minister did not directly seek military support from Bangladesh, but he expressed the hope that the government would come forward if Saudi Arabia and the custodian of the two holy mosques there were threatened. The prime minister in response assured him of Bangladesh's strong support if any such situation arises. During the meeting, Prime Minister Hasina and the Saudi foreign minister agreed to deepen the bilateral cooperation in all fields, including defence, security, fight against terrorism, trade and investment and manpower, according to highly placed sources.

Dhaka opens mission in Addis Ababa²⁹

Bangladesh has opened its resident Mission in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, on March 1 to usher newer avenues for trade and commerce, and social development. Hanif Khan, the chargé d'affaires conducted the day-to-day business

untill Ambassador-Designate to Ethiopia M. Monirul Islam joined, said a foreign ministry press release.

Foreign Minister Mahmood Ali attends the 37th session of the SAARC COM³⁰

Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali urged the SAARC member states to focus on more realistic, result-oriented and mutually beneficial partnership for transforming the region into a development powerhouse through joint efforts. "We must work together in an atmosphere of friendship, peace and stability to continue to remain a secure, stable and prosperous region," he said while addressing the 37th session of the SAARC Council of Ministers (COM) held in Pokhara, Nepal on March 17. The meeting of SAARC COM was preceded by the 42nd session of the SAARC standing committee and the 52nd session of the SAARC programming committee, as part of the SAARC inter-summit sessions. Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque led the Bangladesh delegation at the standing committee. Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali held bilateral meetings with his counterparts from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan on the sidelines of the Inter-Summit Sessions.

President and Prime Minister congratulate new Myanmar president³¹

President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina extended their congratulations to newly elected President of Myanmar Htin Kyaw on March 16. In a message, president hoped that the election will pave the way for a greater peace in Myanmar and joint efforts of both the countries would help make this region a better place. In her separate message, prime minister expressed hope that under the leadership of Htin Kyaw, Myanmar would undertake bold initiatives to infuse a greater trust and understanding between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

World Bank to help BB recover stolen money³²

The World Bank (WB) has proposed to help the Bangladesh Bank (BB) recover the stolen money and enhance cyber security, according to a WB letter sent to the Central Bank of Bangladesh on March 20, 2016. If needed, the multilateral lender said, it is ready to extend support to the BB in resolving any issues with the US Federal Reserve. The WB offer came following the hacking of around \$101 million from the BB's foreign currency account with the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. However, prompt actions helped the BB recover some \$20 million from Sri Lanka. The rest \$81 million, which was taken through the Philippines banking system, could not be recovered yet.

Dhaka condemns Brussels attacks³³

Bangladesh has strongly condemned terrorist attacks at the Brussels Airport and Metro Station that took away so many innocent lives.

HC rejects writ over Islam as state religion³⁴

The High Court (HC) rejected the writ petition that challenged the legality of a constitutional provision giving Islam the status of state religion. Fifteen distinguished citizens under the banner of Sairachar O Samprodaikota Protirodh Committee (Dictatorship and Communalism Resistance Committee) had filed the petition with the HC in 1988. The HC passed the rejection order on the ground that the petitioners

have no jurisdiction to move such a petition, as they are not aggrieved by the provision, Additional Attorney General Murad Reza told media. The HC bench of Justice Naima Haider, Justice Quazi Reza-UI Hoque and Justice Md. Ashraful Kamal also discharged the rule issued earlier over the legality of the provision that gives Islam the status of state religion, he said. The constitutional provision will remain in force following the HC order, added Murad. Petitioners' lawyer Subrata Chowdhury told this correspondent that the HC rejected the petition without hearing his arguments on the jurisdiction of his clients. He said once they receive the full text of the verdict, they would decide whether to appeal against it before the Supreme Court. The Jamaat-e-Islami withdrew its countrywide dawn-to-dusk hartal after the HC rejected the writ petition.

Bhutan

Prime Minister Tobgay meets foreign diplomats³⁵

Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay met with the ambassadors of Myanmar, Mongolia, Slovenia and Serbia on March 2, 2016. Speaking with the ambassador of Myanmar to Bhutan, U Aung Khin Soe, Lyonchoen expressed gratitude towards Myanmar for sending doctors to work in Bhutan. A total of 71 doctors have been sent so far. In his meeting with the Mongolian ambassador, Gonchig Ganbold, also the central Asian country's first ambassador to Bhutan, Lyonchoen thanked Mongolia for allowing Bhutanese doctors to undergo higher studies in traditional medicines there. So far, seven doctors have already been trained and two are currently studying there. Lyonchoen discussed several areas with the ambassador of Slovenia and Serbia, including farm tourism, hydropower, culture, agriculture, and sports, among others.

Bhutanese envoy meets President of Bangladesh³⁶

Bhutanese Ambassador to Bangladesh Pema Choden made a farewell call on Bangladesh President Abdul Hamid at Bangabhaban on March 21, 2016. During the meeting, the president said the scope to expand trade and investment of the region will be increased when the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicle Agreement will be implemented. He said Bhutan can use Mongla and Payra ports for raising its trade. Pema Choden said Bhutan attaches highest importance to strengthening its relations with Bangladesh.

India urged to remove non-tariff barriers³⁷

The Bhutanese business sector sought the help of the Indian Government to remove non-tariff measures (NTM) and non-tariff barriers (NTB) on exports to India and beyond at an event organised by the Embassy of India and Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) on March 22. BCCI deputy secretary general, Kesang Wangdi said the NTMs and NTBs are the major factors affecting trade between the two countries. The SAARC Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) enables Bhutan to trade with other neighbouring countries, but most of the notified points of exit through India to other countries do not have the necessary infrastructure, those in the trading sector pointed out. Indian ambassador to Bhutan, Jaideep Sarkar said problems exist when two countries share a close relationship. "The issue is not the problems but how we deal with them," Jaideep Sarkar said. "To resolve the issues, a structured and intensive dialogue is necessary," he said. He said the BCCI and the Indian embassy should have more detailed dialogue on the issues and raise them to the Government of India.

Bhutan 84th happiest country in the world³⁸

Bhutan may be known as the happiest country in the world, but according to a UN happiness report, it is ranked 84 out of 157 countries around the world. Roughly 3,000 respondents in each country including Bhutan were asked to evaluate their current lives on a scale where 0 represents the worst possible life and 10, the best possible. Overall, Bhutan scored 5.196 in the “happy index”. The happiest country in the world, Denmark scored 7.526 points. The report was released on March 16 in Rome by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network for the United Nations. Bhutan tops the “equality index” with 1.294 points, which means Bhutan is world’s most equal society. Among the South Asian countries, Bhutan is the happiest country followed by Pakistan (92), Nepal (107), Bangladesh (110), Sri Lanka (117) India (118) and Afghanistan (154).

Japan to fund four projects worth US\$ 8.7 million³⁹

The Exchange of Notes for the US\$ 8.5 million Japanese grant aid project for improvement of machinery and equipment for construction of rural agricultural roads (Phase III) was signed in New Delhi on March 15. Ambassador V. Namgyel of Bhutan to Japan, and Ambassador Kenji Hiramatsu of Japan to Bhutan signed the Exchange of Notes. The two ambassadors also signed three grant contracts under the Grant Assistance for Grassroots Projects. The three grant projects include: provision of police cars to community police centres in Paro, Wangdue, and Trashigang amounting to a little more than US\$ 135,300, installation of a safe water supply system in Samthang, Wangdue (around US\$ 24,700), and construction of an RNR centre for subtropical horticulture development in Panbang, Zhemgang (US\$ 61,900).

Foreign minister of Bhutan participates at the Asian Cooperation Dialogue⁴⁰

At the invitation of the Thai foreign minister, Bhutan participated at the 14th Asian Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) in Bangkok which ended March 10, 2016. Foreign Affairs Minister Damcho Dorji led the Bhutanese delegation. On the sidelines of the ACD meeting, Damcho Dorji held a bilateral meeting with the Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai. The two sides discussed ways of further enhancing relations between the two countries. Minister Dorji also met the UNESCAP Executive Secretary Shamshad Akhtar.

Increase in Bhutan’s inward foreign currency remittance⁴¹

Bhutanese working abroad has remitted a record high of about Nu 859 million worth of foreign currencies into the country in 2015. In 2014, the total inward remittance valued in local currency stands at about Nu 521 million. Inward remittance from Australia has doubled from AU\$ 4.24 million in 2014 to AU\$ 8.73 million in 2015. United States of America (USA) is another country from which inward remittance is quite high. Last year, about US\$ 6.6 million has been sent from USA compared with US\$ 4.5 million in 2014. Remittance in form of Pound Sterling is negligible and Euro was recorded at Euro 80,000, a decrease of Euro 1,000 compared with 2014.

President of the Bhutan Youth Development Fund visits Bangladesh⁴²

The president of the Bhutan Youth Development Fund (YDF), Gyalyum Tshering Pem Wangchuck, went to Bangladesh on a five-day study tour to BRAC to explore possibilities for collaboration between BRAC and YDF. On March 15, he met with the Founder and Chairperson of BRAC, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, and BRAC's executive management team at the BRAC Centre, the organization's headquarters in Dhaka. He also met the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina at her residence on the same day.

Japan funded bridge inaugurated⁴³

Japan's ambassador to Bhutan, Kenji Hiramatsu and health minister Tandin Wangchuk inaugurated the government of Japan funded Deychu bridge in Athang gewog, Wangdue, on March 29, 2016. Marking the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the two countries, the government and people of Japan also gifted 29 ambulances worth about Nu 124.7 million to the Bhutanese people. Japanese ambassador to Bhutan Kenji Hiramatsu handed over the ambulances to the Bhutanese Health Minister Tandin Wangchuk on March 28 in a simple ceremony. Japan has given 55 ambulances, including the present lot, to the health ministry in two phases under its grant assistance in the past five years. The new fleet takes the number of ambulances in the country to 110.

Bhutanese minister visits Tilaurakot⁴⁴

Foreign Minister of Bhutan Lyonpo Damcho Dorji visited Tilaurakot, ancient Shakya capital city where Siddhartha Gautam spent 29 years of his princely life before he embarked on a journey to become Buddha on March 19, 2016. Dorji, who was in Nepal to attend the SAARC mini summit held, visited Tilaurakot after taking a tour of Lumbini, birthplace of Buddha. Ajitman Tamang, secretary of Lumbini Development Trust, said the minister, during the visit, enquired about historical and archaeological facts.

Maldives

President Yameen visits Malaysia⁴⁵

President Yameen, during his visit to Malaysia, met with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak on March 29, 2016, and discussed the possibility of extending on arrival visa to 90 days, and discussed about finding a solution to the issue with dependency visa. Najib Razak said during the meeting that he would also consider Malaysian national oil company – PETROAS (Petroliam Nasional Berhad) – selling oil to Maldives. During the meeting, President Yameen noted that investment opportunities were available for Malaysian businesses in Maldives and added that the government wanted to establish a Maldivian cultural center in Malaysia. Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen and Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak have agreed to share intelligence reports the two countries regarding terror threats as well as religious extremists. Speaking during a joint press conference, the Maldivian president said that they were considering signing a treaty to stop double taxation in order to strengthen ties and improve business and economic transactions between the two countries. Reportedly, the two leaders had also discussed to strengthen investment ties – especially in tourism and construction. President

Yameen and First Lady Fathimath Ibrahim met with Maldivians staying in Malaysia during their visit.

India and Pakistan pushed to remove Maldives from CMAG agenda: President Yameen⁴⁶

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom said that it was India and Pakistan that mostly came in defence of the Maldives pushing to remove the Maldives from the agenda of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG). Speaking at the inauguration of the H.A. Utheem Harbor, the President said that India and Pakistan talked in favour of the Maldives at the CMAG session. The President said that the Indian and Pakistani prime ministers talked with him at length on the issue of the Maldives being on the CMAG agenda. The Extraordinary Meeting by the CMAG on February 24 ended after giving the Maldives a reasonable timeframe to do certain things.

Dunya Maumoon attends the 31st session of the Human Rights Council⁴⁷

Speaking at the 31st session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon said that the government would “transform” the Maldives into an advanced democracy that protects the rights of everyone. She said that it cannot be achieved in a matter of days, weeks, or even years and history shows that it takes at least few generations to achieve a sustainable change. The Minister said that all that the country is asking is to give the people of the Maldives the chance, and the privilege to work at its own pace, in its own way, facing its challenges, and learning from them.

Foreign minister meets the chair of European parliament delegation for SA⁴⁸

The Minister of Foreign Affairs Dunya Maumoon and Attorney General, Mohamed Anil met with the Chair of Delegation for Relations with countries for South Asia, Jean Lambert on March 3, 2016. At the meeting, held at the European Parliament both minister and the attorney general updated Lambert on the political situation of Maldives and President Abdulla Yameen’s initiative to reconvene the all-party political dialogue. The Minister also expressed readiness of the government to constructively engage with the international community including the European Parliament. Ambassador of Maldives to Brussels and EU Ahmed Shiaan, Counsellor at the Maldives Mission in Brussels Fathimath Ghina and Director General of the Ministry Khadeeja Najeeha also attended the meeting.

China donates LED lights to the Maldives to be distributed to all households⁴⁹

Memorandum of Understanding to distribute the LED lights donated by Chinese government to all households throughout Maldives was signed by Stelco (State Electric Company), MWSC (Male Water and Sewerage Company) and Fenaka Corporation in a ceremony held at national radio building on March 2, 2016. Speaking during the ceremony, Environment Minister Toriq Ibrahim said that the donation from China would result in lower electricity costs borne by households in Maldives and said that more LED lights from China were on the way. The 210,000 LED lights donated by China are worth MVR 10 million. 78,750 of the lights are to be distributed to State companies, and the remaining 131,250 lights are to be distributed to households.

Increase in number of European tourists boosts Maldivian economy⁵⁰

Tourist arrivals to Maldives in January was increased by 11.7 per cent, providing a boost to Maldivian economy. Statistics released by Tourism Ministry of the Maldives for the month of January shows that 108,396 tourists visited Maldives in January, which is a boost of 11.7 per cent, when compared to the 97,073 tourists who visited the country in January, 2015. Most noticeable increase comes from European tourists.

European Investment Bank grants a loan of US\$ 50 million to Maldives⁵¹

European Investment Bank has granted Maldivian Government a loan of US\$ 50 million to lower expenditure on oil, and improve quality of electricity provided to citizens of the country. The agreement was signed in a ceremony held at Stelco on March 8, 2016, which was attended by Maldivian Finance Minister Abdulla Jihad, and Loan Officer for European Investment Bank, Dr. Tao Ren. Managing Director of Stelco, Abdul Shukoor and Managing Director of Fenaka Corporation, Mohamed Nimal signed the agreement to run the project. State Environment Minister Abdul Matheen Mohamed said that the loan would be used to carry out renewable energy projects, improve quality of electricity in the atolls, and to link electricity systems in Male' and Hulhumale'. Matheen said that they aimed to have 30 per cent of electricity provided to atolls to run on renewable energy within the next three years. The loan has an interest rate of 3.31 per cent and is repayable within 15 years.

Abu Dhabi Fund to loan US\$ 40 million for airport development⁵²

Finance Ministry of the Maldives said that Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) had agreed to provide US\$ 40 million loan for development of Ibrahim Nasir International Airport. Finance Ministry released a statement saying that the commitment was provided by ADFD during the discussions held by senior officials from ADFD and Finance Minister Abdulla Jihad on March 14, during his visit to Saudi Arabia. Jihad met with Director-General of ADFD, Mohammed Saif Al Suwaidi during the visit. In addition to ADFD, Jihad also met with senior officials from Islamic Development Bank (IDB), who, according to Finance Ministry, provided assurances that they would push to increase the previously agreed upon loan amount for airport development project from US\$ 77 million to US\$ 110 million.

Saudis to provide US\$ 50 million to build flats for military, police officers⁵³

Saudi Arabian Government has made the decision to provide Maldives with US\$ 50 million in non-reimbursable aid to build flats for Maldives National Defense Force (MNDF) and Maldives Police Service officers. The decision was made during Maldivian Defence Minister Adam Shareef Umar's visit to Saudi Arabia to attend the ceremony held to mark the end of the first military exercise – *Exercise North Thunder* – by the coalition force set up under the initiation of Saudi Arabian government to fight against terrorism. Minister Shareef, during his visit to Saudi Arabia from March 10 to 13, met with Saudi King - Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Saudi Defence Minister Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud, and leaders from other Islamic countries.

Maldives and Saudi seal deal to start air travel between two countries⁵⁴

Saudi Arabia and Maldives signed an agreement to officially start up air travel between the two countries on March 29, 2016. The agreement is to start direct flights by national airline of Saudi Arabia, Saudia, to Maldives, as well as to start direct flights by Maldivian airlines to different Saudi Arabian cities. The agreement was signed on behalf of Maldivian Government by Tourism Minister Moosa Zameer – who is also the minister for Civil Aviation Authority, and on Saudi Arabian government by President of General Authority of Civil Aviation Sulaiman al-Hamdhan. The agreement allows Maldivian airlines to operate 14 flights to Riyadh, Jeddah and Medina each week. While any number of flights can be operated to Dammam.

WHO donates six ambulances and medical equipment⁵⁵

World Health Organisation (WHO) has donated six ambulances and essential medical equipment needed at the atolls to the Health Ministry of the Maldives. At a special ceremony held at the STO Head Office on March 27, the symbolic gesture of the donations were presented to the Health Minister Iruthisham Adam by the WHO representative to the Maldives Dr. Arvind Mathur. The ambulances received have been given to Kulhudhuffushi Regional Hospital, Sh. Milandhoo Health Center, Hulhumalé Hospital, Dr. Abdul Samad Memorial Hospital, G.Dh. Faresmaathoda Health Center and Hithadhoo Regional Hospital, Addu City.

52nd SAARC programming committee meeting begins⁵⁶

The 52nd South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Programming Committee began in Nepal on March 15, 2016. Maldivian delegation that participated in the Joint Committee meeting was led by Joint Secretary for Foreign Ministry Farzana Fahir.

President Yameen sends Pakistan Day felicitations to the president and prime minister of Pakistan⁵⁷

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom sent messages of greetings to President Mamnoon Hussain, and Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan on the occasion of Pakistan Day.

President Yameen sends message of sympathy to the Belgian PM⁵⁸

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom sent a message of sympathy to the Prime Minister of Belgium Charles Michel following the bomb attacks at the Zaventem Airport, Schuman and Maalbeek metro stations.

Maldives' state income and state reserve goes down⁵⁹

Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) said that State income for December 2015 went down, and that state reserve depleted by end of January 2016. In MMA's economic review for February, it was stated that state reserve by end of January was at US\$ 591.9 million. The amount is a 4 per cent decrease when compared to January 2015; and a 5 per cent decrease when compared to December 2015. Looking into statistics related to state expenses and income, state received MVR 1.3 billion

– minus non-reimbursable financial aid – as income in December 2015 – which is MVR 125.9 million short of income received in December 2014. MMA identified the main factor leading to the fall in income level to the decrease in income received from taxation. As such, MMA noted that tax on goods and services in tourism industry – TGST – and tax on regular goods and services – GST – has gone down. State expenditure in December 2015 was MVR 2 billion – a MVR 1.1 billion increase when compared to December 2014. MMA identified the rise in recurrent and capital expenditure as the driving factors for the rise in state expenditure in December 2015. MMA said that inflation rate on goods and services in Male' City on January rose 1.4 per cent compared to that in January 2015. In MMA's economic review report for February, the institution identified the main factors leading to the inflation rate rise to increase in price of household items and education.

MDP rejects government's invitation to talks for fifth time⁶⁰

The Government of Maldives expressed continued disappointment over the Maldivian Democratic Party's (MDP) rejection to attend one-to-one talks. On March 14, the Party rejected the government's invitation to enter into open discussions for the fifth time — the initial invitations were made to all parties while the last three invitations were made to the MDP alone so as to facilitate the party's involvement in the talks in order to ensure the clear and vocal representation, and contribution, of the principal opposition within the proceedings. Dr. Mohamed Shainee, the Minister for Fisheries and Agriculture, who has been tasked with leading the government representatives at the talks expressed his deep disappointment at the turn of events.

Opposition leaders in London discuss major political move⁶¹

Maldivian opposition leaders in London have discussed a number of major political moves. Among the attendees of the discussion include former President Mohamed Nasheed, former Vice President Dr. Mohamed Jameel Ahmed, former Foreign Secretary and the UN special rapporteur to Iran, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, Deputy Leader of Jumhooree Party, Ameen Ibrahim and the MDP Chairper, Ali Waheed. Dr. Ahmed Shaheed tweeted a picture at the meeting along with some points of discussion. Dr. Shaheed said that a decision was made at the meeting to raise concern against the death sentence for political motives. He also said that a campaign to bring government officials to a human Rights committee and a campaign to gain special attention to the Maldives at a corruption summit in the UK this May was initiated.

President ratifies first amendment to the act on prevention of terrorism⁶²

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom has ratified the first amendment to the "Act on Prevention of Terrorism" (Act No. 32/2015). The amendment was passed by the Parliament at the 14th sitting of its first session, on March 16, 2016. Following ratification, the Act was published in the Government Gazette. The amendment states that the President will constitute a list of suspected terrorist organisations, which will be monitored by the Maldives National Defence Force, as per instruction from the National Security Council.

IFJ calls for government to withdraw defamation bill⁶³

International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) called for Maldivian government to withdraw the bill to amend Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act, which has been accepted into People's Majlis for consideration. IFJ joins Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) in criticizing the bill, which they called an attack on press freedom and media. IFJ's statement comes after 10 top Maldivian journalists released a joint press statement on March 27 saying that the bill prevented journalists and ordinary citizens from speaking about serious accusations of corruption about senior state officials, and questioning their integrity. They expressed concern that anyone who said anything remotely offensive regarding a state official ran the risk of criminal investigation and prosecution on the pretence of defamation, and added that it was a clear violation of freedom of speech – a constitutional right of every citizen. The bill calls for fines between MVR 5000 to MVR 5 million for violations – and jail sentences for those who fail to pay the fine. It also calls for media stations that published anything deemed as “defamatory” to have their licenses revoked. The bill was proposed to Majlis on behalf of government by Parliamentary Group Leader of ruling Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), Vili-Mafannu MP Ahmed Nihan.

Nepal

Prime Minister Oli visits China⁶⁴

Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, who was on a weeklong official visit to China, called on President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping on March 21, 2016. During the meeting held at Beijing-based 'Great Hall of the People', matters relating to mutual interests and bilateral cooperation were discussed. During the meet, PM Oli handed over an invitation letter to President Xi Jinping on behalf of Nepali President Bidhya Devi Bhandari. In a joint statement issued in Beijing on March 23 at the conclusion of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's visit, the Chinese side welcomed the promulgation of the constitution in Nepal and regarded it as a historic progress in the political transition of Nepal. The major highlight of PM Oli's visit has been the signing of the Agreement on Transit and Transport. To facilitate the new transit agreement, Nepal has decided to establish a Consulate General office in Guangzhou, which is close to the Chinese port Tianjin, the closest one from Nepal's border. The two sides also agreed to establish a Dialogue Mechanism on Energy Cooperation to facilitate the long-term planning of cooperation in this area, including trans-border power grid, hydro-power and solar power among others. The Nepali side agreed to take necessary steps to facilitate Chinese enterprises and their investment in Nepal. The Chinese side also agreed to provide financial support on preferential terms for Pokhara Regional International Airport that ensures construction of the regional airport in Pokhara. On infrastructure front, as per the request made by the Nepali side, the Chinese side has agreed to accelerate the feasibility study of the Araniko Highway Repair and Opening Maintenance Project and the Repair and Opening Maintenance Project of Syaphrubesi-Rasuwadhi Highway and build the bridge over the Karnali river at Hilsa of Pulan/Yari port. Similarly, two sides also agreed to accelerate the upgradation of Kathmandu Ring Road phase by resolving the pending issues and start the project feasibility study of second phase at appropriate time. The two sides also agreed to synergise each other's development planning, formulate appropriate bilateral cooperation programmes and carry out major projects under

the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Both sides agreed to conclude a commercial deal on the supply of petroleum products from China to Nepal. In this context, they encouraged companies to speed up negotiations. The Chinese side also agreed to build oil storage facilities for Nepal and will send experts to Nepal to carry out feasibility study on oil and gas resources research. The two sides have agreed to start the joint feasibility study of China-Nepal Free Trade Agreement and conclude the study at an early date.

Nepal becomes SCO dialogue partner⁶⁵

After a long wait, Nepal has officially become a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with the signing of a memorandum. Foreign Secretary Shanker Das Bairagi and SCO Secretary-General Rashid K. Alimov inked the memorandum on March 22, amid a special ceremony held at the SCO Secretariat in Beijing. The programme was witnessed by Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and other senior ministers, who were on an official visit to China. Nepal had applied for dialogue partner of the SCO in 2007 and in 2015. The 15th SCO Summit held in July last year in Ufa, Russia, decided to grant Nepal the dialogue partner status.

Chief of Army Staff Rajendra Chhetri visits China⁶⁶

Chief of Army Staff Rajendra Chhetri made a week-long official visit to China on March 27, 2016 on the invitation of General Fang Fenghui, chief of the People's Liberation Army of China. This was Gen Chhetri's first visit to China.

Tarai forces draw China's attention to their agendas⁶⁷

The Madhes-based parties have submitted "a letter" to Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Wu Chuntai in an effort to draw Beijing's attention and support toward the Madhes Movement. A group of leaders from 15 regional parties handed over the letter to Ambassador Wu amid a formal programme organised at Shangrila Hotel in Kathmandu on March 18, 2016. On the occasion, the leaders briefed the ambassador on their concerns and urged China to press Kathmandu to meet their demands. This is the first formal request for support made by Madhesis and Janajatis to China while the Samyukta Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha leadership has made several trips to New Delhi and Bihar to seek help. During the two-hour meeting, the envoy clarified that as the second largest economy in the world, China's priority was economic prosperity and development of Nepal. He addressed the meeting for about half-an-hour but refrained from commenting on Nepal's political situation.

Sushma Swaraj enquires about progress in Madhes crisis⁶⁸

Visiting Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj discussed the Madhes issue during her separate meetings with Prime Minister Oli and Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Kamal Thapa in Pokhara on March 16, 2016 on the sidelines of SAARC Conference of Ministers. PM Oli's Chief Political Adviser Bishnu Rimal refused to divulge the details of the meeting, saying it was a "one-on-one meeting". Reports of Swaraj's concern over the political mechanism coincide with Indian statement on Nepal during Universal Periodic Review of Human Rights (UPR) session in Geneva, where New Delhi called for a "defined timeframe" to settle

remaining issues. "We regard the two constitutional amendments passed by the Nepali Parliament in January 2016 as positive developments. We hope that other remaining issues will be similarly addressed in a constructive spirit in a defined timeframe," read the statement.

Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar meets SLMM leaders⁶⁹

Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar met leaders of the Samyukta Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha (SLMM) on March 15, 2016. During the meeting, Jaishankar enquired about the status of Madhes agitation and recent activities of the Madhes-based parties. The Morcha delegation told Jaishankar that the government had not addressed their demands. They said that they have issued an ultimatum to the government to address the demands by mid-April. Morcha leaders present in the meeting told media that they sought "more active role of India in resolving remaining demands, including the revision of federal boundaries". They lamented that the establishment in New Delhi "was not doing enough to press Kathmandu to address their concerns".

Nepal has failed to attract bigger FDI from India: Ambassador Ranjit Rae⁷⁰

Indian Ambassador to Nepal Ranjit Rae said that Nepal has failed to attract bigger foreign direct investment (FDI) from India. Although FDI commitments from China and other countries have grown lately, India has traditionally been Nepal's largest source of foreign investment. "Nepal should create investment friendly environment to attract more FDI from India," said Rae at an interaction organised jointly by Nepal India Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs in association with Indian Embassy on March 21, 2016.

India cuts 40 per cent in aid to Nepal⁷¹

Indian Government reduced its financial aid to Nepal by 40 per cent in the Union Budget presented on February 29, 2016. INR 3 billion has been allocated for aid to Nepal for 2016-17. Last year's allocation was INR 4.20 billion.

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar visits Nepal⁷²

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar went to Kathmandu to take part in the 13th General Convention of Nepali Congress on March 3, 2016. During the visit, the chief minister met President Bidya Devi Bhandari and Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli.

NOC requests India to supply more LPG⁷³

Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) Spokesperson Mukunda Ghimire said the corporation had requested the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Nepal Embassy in New Delhi on March 29 to ensure supplies of 40,000 tonnes of cooking gas next month (mid-April to mid-May). "If we get more cooking gas, the ongoing shortage will end," said Ghimire, speaking at an open forum organised by Youth Association of Nepal, a sister organisation of the ruling CPN-UML. He said that the request had been made to the Indian government as Nepal needed additional supplies. NOC blamed the scarcity of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) on the prolonged shortage

during the trade embargo that lasted four and a half months. It said that Nepal received only 4,000 tonnes and 6,000 tonnes of cooking gas respectively during the first two months of the blockade.

Government of Nepal takes serious exception to EU-India statement⁷⁴

Nepal Government has taken serious exception to the reference made towards Nepal after the conclusion of the 13th EU-India Summit in Brussels on March 30. Issuing a statement on March 31, Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Nepal has promulgated the constitution through a democratically elected Constituent Assembly and the new constitution fully accommodates the aspirations of the people of Nepal. The ministry states that the EU-India Joint Statement not only hurts the sentiments of the people of Nepal but also defies the fundamental principle of non-interference in internal affairs of a country in breach of UN Charter and norms of international law. The government has also called to fully respect the sovereign and democratic rights of the people of Nepal and refrain from making uncalled for statements stating the people of Nepal are capable of resolving their issues themselves within the framework of the constitution. India and the 28-member European Union ended their 13th summit in Brussels urging Nepal to politically address the contentious issues of the new constitution to make it stable and inclusive. A joint statement issued after the summit had remarked that Nepal could be politically and economically stable only after addressing the remaining dissented political issues.

Probe into Tarai violence: UN⁷⁵

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein in his annual speech to the Human Rights Council (HRC) on March 10, 2016 urged Nepal Government to conduct a full and independent investigation into recent violence in the Tarai region, and to ensure a credible transitional justice process in line with international standards. Over 50 people, including 11 security personnel, were killed during a five-month-long protest in the Tarai. In its response to the council, Nepal has claimed to have set up transitional justice bodies and endorsed regulations for both of them. Regarding the recommendation to ratify the Rome Statute, Nepal has said that the government will "pursue the policy to build requisite infrastructure before joining any international instruments." As the Statute will not have retrospective impact, this instrument is a preventive measure to avoid possible war crime in post conflict countries.

Sher Bahadur Deuba elected as the new president of Nepali Congress⁷⁶

Former prime minister and senior leader of Nepali Congress Sher Bahadur Deuba has been elected as the party president in a run-off, defeating acting party President Ram Chandra Poudel with a wide margin on March 7, 2016. Deuba, a three-time prime minister, secured 1,822 votes out of the 3,140 ballots cast in the second round polling. His rival Poudel secured 1296 votes. Twenty two votes were cancelled. A third candidate for the party presidency, General Secretary Krishna Prasad Sitaula, who secured 324 votes in the first-round vote, dropped out of the race. Speaking to the media, Deuba said he would unite the party and focus on implementing the new constitution.

ADB report projects Nepal's GDP growth lowest in South Asia⁷⁷

Nepal's economic growth is expected to be the lowest and inflation the highest in South Asia this fiscal year, said the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on March 30, 2016. Delayed implementation of reconstruction programmes, extended trade and transit disruptions and unfavourable monsoon that hit agriculture production will drag down Nepal's economic growth to 1.5 per cent, the ADB said in its flagship Asian Development Outlook 2016 (ADO 2016). The ADB has however said that Nepal's economy could rebound next year with the growth of 4.8 per cent if the country enjoys normal monsoon, the National Reconstruction Authority accelerates reconstruction and there is normal cross-border trade and progress in resolving domestic political tensions.

Nepal hosts regional dialogue to bring SAARC youths for achieving development goals⁷⁸

The "SAARC Regional Dialogue on Promoting Youth Participation in the Implementation of SDGs" was held in Kathmandu on March 24-25, 2016. The event aimed at exploring ways and means to promote effective youth engagement mechanisms at national and sub-national levels in South Asia. A total of 19 youth and 13 government representatives from SAARC member states participated in the two-day Regional Dialogue event. The event was supported by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Nepal condemns Brussels blasts⁷⁹

Nepal condemned the terrorist attacks at different places in Brussels on March 22, 2016. "The Government of Nepal is shocked to learn about the terrorist attacks at different places in Brussels that resulted in massive loss of precious lives and injuries to many innocent people," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) said in a press release on March 23, 2016. The Government of Nepal, in line with its principled position, unequivocally condemns terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and holds the view that terrorism must be firmly and resolutely dealt with wherever and whenever it takes place, added the MoFA release.

US lifts travel warning for Nepal⁸⁰

The United States (US) has lifted restrictions on their citizens travelling to Nepal. The restriction was issued on October 8, 2015 for geological instability in Nepal following the earthquake, the monsoon season, unrest in Tarai, and country-wide fuel shortages. "Because conditions have changed, the travel warning was cancelled effective February 29, 2016," read a statement issued by Embassy of the United States in Kathmandu on March 1.

British Prince Harry visits Nepal⁸¹

British Prince Henry Charles Albert David 'Harry' paid a courtesy call on President Bidya Devi Bhandari on March 20, 2016 during his five-day trip to Nepal. During the meeting that took place at the Rastrapati Bhawan Sheetal Niwas in Maharajgunj, the two exchanged views on various aspects concerning friendly relations existing between the two countries since two centuries. On the occasion,

Pakistan

Prince Harry expressed his concerns over the conservation of Nepal's natural heritages including mountains, and wildlife, the Office of the President said. He praised the dedication, honesty and valour, the characteristics of the British Gurkhas.

Nisar Ali Khan confirms intelligence sharing with India⁸²

Federal Minister for Interior Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan told Senate that some 10 to 15 people might have crossed the border and intelligence sharing had taken place between Pakistan and India in this regard. The interior minister said that such activities were being carried out by "non-state actors" but Pakistan had to take the burden of responsibility. He said that besides India, more intelligence sharing was taking place with Afghanistan as Pakistan had a clear policy that it would not let its soil be used for carrying out terrorist activities in any other country.

Indian envoy summoned to receive demarche over RAW agent's arrest⁸³

Indian High Commissioner Gautam Bambawale was summoned to the Foreign Office on March 25, 2016 to receive a demarche over the arrest of an Indian intelligence operative from Balochistan. "The Indian High Commissioner was summoned by the Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry and through a demarche conveyed our protest and deep concern on the illegal entry into Pakistan by a RAW officer and his involvement in subversive activities in Balochistan and Karachi," the FO said in a statement. Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan said in a separate statement that the arrest had proven Pakistan's claims about involvement of foreign hand in unrest in Balochistan and that it was a very serious matter. The arrest of the RAW agent in Chaman (Balochistan) was announced by security agencies on March 24, 2016.

Pakistani team in India for Pathankot attack probe⁸⁴

A five-member Joint Investigation Team (JIT) from Pakistan, including an ISI official, reached India on March 27, 2016 to carry out a probe into the attack on the IAF base at Pathankot. Reportedly, the team was headed by chief of Punjab's Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) Mohammad Tahir Rai and comprises Lahore's Deputy Director General Intelligence Bureau Mohammad Azim Arshad, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) official Lt. Col. Tanvir Ahmed, Military Intelligence official Lt. Col. Irfan Mirza and Gujranwala CTD Investigating Officer Shahid Tanveer.

Indian president extends greetings on Pakistan Day⁸⁵

Indian President Pranab Mukherjee extended his warm wishes to his Pakistani counterpart President Mamnoon Hussain on Pakistan Day. "Please accept my greetings on the occasion on the national day of Pakistan," the Indian president said in a letter to President Mamnoon Hussain.

Modi condemns blast⁸⁶

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a telephonic conversation with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif condemned the blast that took place in Lahore's Gulshan-i-Iqbal Park. In his reported remarks during the phone call with Sharif, Prime

Minister Modi said that coward terrorists had targeted women and kids which was highly condemnable and regrettable.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani visits Pakistan⁸⁷

Pakistan and Iran pledged to boost their trade ties and energy cooperation in an attempt to turn a new page in their relations after lifting of sanctions against Iran. The agreement was reached as Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who led a large political and economic delegation, including 60 businessmen, opened a two-day visit to Pakistan with a meeting with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on March 25, 2016. Prime Minister Sharif and President Rouhani discussed new border crossings and Gwadar-Chabahar cooperation. The two leaders, following their one-to-one meeting and delegation-level talks, appeared before television cameras to deliver short statements. The Iranian president said the discussions centred on diversification of trade and economic relations and exploring new opportunities of cooperation in the energy sector. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) on a five-year strategic trade cooperation plan was among the six agreements signed by the two sides. The other accords pertained to insurance, culture, health and research.

Pakistan, Iran discuss ways to curb trans-border crimes⁸⁸

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan and his Iranian counterpart Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli discussed on March 26, 2016 ways to check trans-border crimes, including drug and human trafficking. A press note issued by the interior ministry after their meeting said: "Chaudhry Nisar underscored the need for further strengthening the existing mechanism for effective monitoring and management of porous Pak-Iran border." "Chaudhry Nisar told Mr Fazli that Pakistan looks forward to Iran's assistance over illegal border crossing," said an official of the ministry. Despite claims made by Khan a day earlier that he would take up with the Iranian minister the issue of an Indian agent allegedly operating from Iran, the matter was not discussed directly during the meeting, according to the official. Later, however, on March 31, Pakistan asked Tehran to investigate and share details of Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav's activities in Iran, along with those of his colleague, who was identified as Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) Sub Inspector Rakesh alias Rizwan.

FIA starts investigations into allegations about RAW funds for MQM⁸⁹

The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has started investigation into allegations of funding by Indian intelligence agency RAW to the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and summoned Sarfaraz Merchant, one of the suspects in a money-laundering case against the MQM in London, to record his statement and provide evidence, if any. Informed sources said the interior minister had asked the FIA to investigate the allegations levelled by Sarfaraz Merchant against the MQM and its leadership. An inquiry team of the FIA will investigate the charges against the party of money laundering, illegal purchase of weapons and RAW funding. The interior ministry has also sent a communication to all security and intelligence agencies asking them to share with the inquiry team evidence or information relating to the allegations. In a TV programme, Sarfaraz Merchant claimed that several

lists of explosive weapons had been found in the house of Altaf Hussain in London during a raid by Scotland Yard in 2014. He also spoke of the party's links with India in the first-ever TV interview since the launch of the money-laundering investigation in 2012. He claimed that police had shown him a list of highly explosive weapons found in the MQM chief's house and asked him if he had paid for the weapons or knew whose signatures were there on the list. The list shows that over £65,000 has been paid for the weapons as well as its conversion into Indian rupee.

Prime Minister Sharif visits Saudi Arabia⁹⁰

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif made a three-day official visit to Saudi Arabia on March 9 on the invitation of King Salman bin Abdulaziz. He was received at the King Saud Airport by Saudi Defence Minister Muhammad bin Salman and senior officials. Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif and Special Assistant to Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Tariq Fatemi accompanied Nawaz Sharif on the visit.

COAS meets Afghan president, top US defence leadership during Kabul stopover⁹¹

Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Raheel Sharif made a brief stopover in Kabul on March 2, 2016 where he attended the Change of Command Ceremony for the Resolute Support Mission and met with top Afghan leadership. The COAS discussed regional security and border management in meetings with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, United States (US) Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) General Joseph Dunford, General Lloyd J. Austin Commander US Central Command (CENTCOM) and Resolute Support Mission Commander Gen Nicholson. The meetings focused on checking cross-border movement of terrorists and coordination regarding the Pakistan Army's Shawal offensive.

Commander of Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan visits Pakistan⁹²

Commander of Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, Gen John Nicholson met Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif on his first visit to Pakistan. During the meeting, both Gen Sharif and Gen Nicholson shared their assessment of the situation in Afghanistan in addition to a detailed discussion on the reconciliation process. The army chief briefed the US commander about the progress being made by Pakistani troops in counter-terrorism operations in FATA.

Differences on nuclear issue surface at US strategic talks⁹³

Foreign Affairs Adviser Sartaj Aziz urged the United States on February 29 to show a greater understanding of Pakistan's security concerns as US Secretary of State John Kerry asked Islamabad to consider reducing its nuclear arsenal. The two top diplomats made these remarks at the inaugural session of the US-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue, which both sides used also to vent their concerns on pressing issues instead of confining themselves to traditional bonhomie exchanged at such occasions.

Kerry praises Pakistanis fighting terrorism⁹⁴

US Secretary of State John Kerry said on March 2 that those fighting terrorism in Pakistan were doing so for a better future for the country. He made these remarks

while condoling the death of two Pakistani employees of the US Consulate in Peshawar who were killed during a drug eradication mission in FATA. Secretary Kerry also offered US assistance to the government in investigating the incident and bringing the perpetrators to justice.

F-16 deal becomes effective after end of mandatory period⁹⁵

Pakistan's deal to purchase eight F-16 jet fighters from the United States became effective on March 11, a day after the US Senate rejected a measure to block the sale. "We appreciate the leadership of the US Congress in consistently supporting Pak-US counter-terrorism partnership," said Pakistan's Ambassador Jalil Abbas Jilani while commenting on the Senate vote. "The vote is a demonstration of the strength and resilience of Pak-US Relationship." On Feb12, the US State Department notified Congress of its intention to sell \$700 million worth of weapons to Pakistan, which included eight Block-52 F-16s. The department argued that the jets were critical to Pakistan's efforts to deny terrorists a safe haven within its borders. Congress had 30 days to convey its objection to the administration. After this mandatory period the deal would automatically become effective. On March 10, 2016, the US Senate rejected a measure to block the proposed sale by 71 to 24 votes

Sharif cancels US visit⁹⁶

In "solidarity" with victims of the terrorist attack in Lahore, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif cancelled his visit to the United States to attend the Nuclear Security Summit. The Foreign Office made the announcement hours before the prime minister was scheduled to depart for the trip. The Pakistani delegation to the summit was led by Tariq Fatemi, special assistant to the prime minister.

Chinese delegation calls on Bilawal⁹⁷

A delegation of the Communist Party of China called on PPP Chair-man Bilawal Bhutto Zardari on March 15, 2016. According to PPP spokesman Farhatullah Babar, the Chinese delegation was led by LI Jun, the Assistant Minister of International Department of the Central Committee of Communist Party of China (IDCPC). Bilawal was assisted by former prime ministers, Yousuf Raza Gillani and Raja Pervez Ashraf. The PPP chairman hailed the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor for its enormous potential and said that it would not only spur development in Pakistan but also promote regional connectivity and peace.

Chinese team visits Gwadar port⁹⁸

An eight-member Chinese delegation inspected the Gwadar deep seaport on March 9, 2016. Wa Xian, Secretary of the Communist Party, Xinjiang chapter, led the delegation sent by China's Foreign Ministry Committee. The Chinese team was given a briefing by the Director General of Planning and Development Munir Ahmed Jan, and Chairman of District Council Gwadar Babo Gulab.

Chinese investors demonstrate interest in Gwadar projects⁹⁹

Senior officials of two Chinese delegations, who reached Gwadar on March 15, 2016 on a three-day visit, showed keen interest in investment in several proposed

development projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and said that the port city would prove to be an economic hub for the entire region. A 19-member delegation was led by the Vice President of China's Central Development Bank Xaio Mingzheng, while the other delegation was headed by the Secretary General of Secretariat of Karamay and Chief of Centre of Social and Economic Development Research Duan Linyun. Members of the delegations inspected an under-construction school in Faqir Colony funded by the Chinese government, Port Civic Centre, Gwadar Free Trade Zone, Gwadar Development Authority and Gwadar Port Complex. Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) Chairman Dostain Khan Jamaldani and Director General of Gwadar Development Authority Sajjad Hussain Baloch briefed members of the delegations on different under-construction projects.

BJP delegation meets Bilawal Bhutto Zardari¹⁰⁰

PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has called for increasing people-to-people contacts between India and Pakistan to improve ties. The call was made by the PPP leader during a meeting with a three-member delegation of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which met him at the Zardari House on March 12, 2016. Vijay Jolly, a member of the BJP's national executive committee and ex-convenor of the party's foreign cell, led the delegation. Vijay Mehta and Lubna Asif are other members of the delegation. The BJP delegation went to Islamabad to participate in the two-day workshop on "Human Trafficking" organised by the International Conference of Asian Political Parties.

Pakistan and Belarus hold 2nd meeting of Joint Working Group on Agriculture¹⁰¹

The second meeting of Pakistan-Belarus Joint Working Group on Agriculture concluded on March 18, 2016 with the signing of protocols which laid the negotiating platform for creation of joint ventures to produce dairy products in Pakistan using raw materials imported from Belarus. The Belarusian ministry of food and agriculture organised an exhibition of milk and halal meat products produced in Belarus on the sidelines of the joint working group meeting. At the joint working group meeting, the Belarusian delegation was led by Ihar Brylo and the Pakistani side by Hashim Popalzai. Ambassador of Belarus to Pakistan Andrei Ermolovich also attended the meeting. During the working visit to Islamabad the Belarusian delegation held negotiations with Minister of National Food Security and Research Sikandar Hayat Khan Bosan, top management of research agencies and companies in the field of agriculture.

Pakistan Navy warship reaches French island¹⁰²

The Pakistan Navy (PN) warship, PNS ASLAT, has reached the French island of LA Reunion on March 19, 2016 to participate in an exercise with the French Navy. The governor (prefecture) of De LA Reunion, while meeting the PN officers, said that France and Pakistan enjoyed very friendly and cordial relations. The visit by the PN warship would further strengthen the bilateral bonds, he added.

Japan to fund project for combating drugs and transnational organised crime¹⁰³

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) would launch a project this year aimed at strengthening Pakistan's border security to curb illicit drug trafficking and transnational organised crime. The project, to be implemented with Japanese assistance of \$6.5 million, will build the capacity of Pakistan's law enforcement agencies to effectively interdict illicit narcotics entering or leaving the country through air, land and sea routes. The UNODC Pakistan will implement the project under its country programme for 2016-2019. The UNODC Pakistan and the Japanese embassy in Islamabad signed the project documents in presence of senior officials from the ministries of interior and narcotics control and economic affairs division.

President calls for resolution of Palestine issue¹⁰⁴

President Mamnoon Hussain has linked permanent restoration of peace in the Middle East with the resolution of the long-standing Palestine issue. The government and people of Pakistan considered the issue as their own and promised continued and unequivocal support to their Palestinian brethren, he said on March 7, 2016 at the 5th extraordinary session of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on Palestine and Al Quds, held in Jakarta. Reportedly, he emphasised the need for an early solution to the Palestine problem and reiterated Pakistan's stance for complete withdrawal of Israelis from the occupied Arab territories and the inalienable right of Palestinian people to self-determination and sovereignty in an independent state on the basis of pre-1967 borders with Al Quds as its capital. The OIC summit titled 'United for just solution', hosted by Indonesia at the request of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, gathered heads of state and representatives from 49 Muslim countries.

Agreement signed with Turkey to initiate talks on FTA¹⁰⁵

Pakistan and Turkey have signed a framework agreement for establishing free trade area between the two countries. The framework will provide a basis for future negotiations on free trade agreement (FTA). Pakistan's Commerce Minister Khurram Dastgir Khan and Turkey's Minister of Economy Mustafa Elitas signed the framework agreement, which stipulated the broader outlines and the areas in which talks on FTA will proceed. The framework states that the two sides would hold negotiations on trade in goods, trade in services, intellectual property rights, competition policies and dispute settlement mechanism.

Government approves strategic trade policy framework for 2015-18¹⁰⁶

After a delay of eight months, the government has approved the Strategic Trade Policy Framework (STPF) 2015-18 with an ambitious export target of \$35 billion by 2018. The government would provide Rs 20 billion for the implementation of the policy for the next three years. For this fiscal year, Rs 6 billion has already been earmarked. The policy aims for product sophistication and diversification, market access, institutional development and strengthening and trade facilitation. The Intellectual Property Organisation of Pakistan will be placed under the ambit of the commerce ministry.

IMF board approves US\$ 502 million tranche¹⁰⁷

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has approved a US\$ 502 million tranche for Pakistan, a statement issued by the Ministry of Finance said on March 25, 2016. The Fund's board meeting was held in Washington and considered the 10th review report of the Extended Fund Facility (EFF). Earlier, the Pakistan-IMF talks for the 10th review were held in Dubai in the first week of February 2016. Finance Minister Ishaq Dar welcomed the approval accorded by the IMF board and hoped to complete all the reviews under the EFF.

Pakistan economy will continue to pick up: ADB¹⁰⁸

Pakistan's economy will continue to pick up during the current fiscal year as reform and stabilisation measures provide lift, with higher foreign exchange reserves, and softer inflation and oil prices also supporting the overall macroeconomic outlook, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) said in its annual economic report released on March 30, 2016. The 'Asian Development Outlook (ADO) 2016' forecasts growth of 4.5 per cent for fiscal year ending June 2016, and 4.8 per cent for fiscal year 2016-17, assuming continued macroeconomic stability, expected improvement in energy supply, and planned infrastructure investment tied to an economic corridor project linking Pakistan with China.

Nisar rejects PPP criticism over letting Musharraf go abroad¹⁰⁹

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan rejected criticism by the PPP of the government's decision to let former president retired General Pervez Musharraf leave the country. He said in a statement that the PPP leadership had adopted 'dual standards' in the Musharraf case, adding that the government had allowed the former president to proceed abroad in light of the Supreme Court's decision. The minister said the PPP, which was making a hue and cry on the issue, had done nothing against Musharraf despite the fact that he was nominated as an accused in the Benazir Bhutto assassination case.

Sri Lanka

Former Sri Lankan President Kumaratunga attends Raisina Dialogue¹¹⁰

Speaking at the inauguration of the three-day Raisina Dialogue, envisioned as India's flagship conference of geopolitics and geo-economics, the former President of Sri Lanka Chandrika Kumaratunga said that the economic integration in South Asia proceeded very slowly while the cooperation and economic integration proceeded very fast in the rest of the world. The former President called for a pragmatic action plan for regional integration in South Asia. During her visit to India, former President met India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj on March 2, 2016.

Sri Lankan state minister of defence visits India¹¹¹

State Minister of Defence Ruwan Wijewardene visited India to attend the Defence Expo 2016 in Goa. Secretary to the Ministry of Defence Karunasena Hettiarachchi and Commander of the Army Lieutenant General Chrisantha De Silva accompanied the state minister. The Sri Lankan delegates led by the state minister of defence visited Goa Shipyards Ltd. on March 27, to inspect the progress of the

two Advanced Offshore Patrol Vessels that are being built for Sri Lanka Navy. Sri Lanka defence delegation held discussions with the Chairman and Managing Director of Goa Shipyards Ltd, Rear Admiral (Retd.) Shekar Mittal along with the shipyard officials on the progress of the ship building process.

India awards contract to establish Rabindranath Tagore Memorial Auditorium in Ruhuna University¹¹²

As part of its development partnership with Sri Lanka in the field of higher education, the Government of India is undertaking a project to set up the Rabindranath Tagore Memorial Auditorium in the University of Ruhuna, Matara at a cost of SLRs. 265 million. Following a process of competitive bidding, a contract to construct the building complex was signed on March 17, 2016 with M/s. Link Engineering (Pvt.) Ltd in the presence of High Commissioner of India Y.K. Sinha, State Secretary, Ministry of Higher Education D.G.M.V. Hapuarachchi, Vice-Chancellor of University of Ruhuna Prof. Gamini Senanayake, Deputy Vice Chancellor Dr. A. M. N. Alagiyawanna, Assistant Director, Department of External Resources T. M. Rihan, and other government officials.

Sampanthan to discuss the environmental impact of Sampur power plant with India¹¹³

The leader of Sri Lanka's Opposition and TNA, Trincomalee district MP R. Sampanthan said he would discuss with the Indian High Commission the "substantial" environmental problems that will be created if India sets up a 500 MW coal-fired power plant at Sampur in his district. "The people of the area have been telling me about the substantial pollution and environmental damage which will be caused and have accused me of not taking any action on it. A solar powered plant in place of the coal-fired one is very much in my mind." Lankan environmentalists quote the US-based Union of Concerned Scientists to say that a 500 MW coal fired plant will release, every year, 10,000 tons of Sulfur Dioxide (the main cause of acid rain); 10,200 tons of Nitrogen Oxide, which causes smog; 3.7 million tons of Carbon Dioxide, a leading cause of global warming; 500 tons of small particles which cause lung damage; 720 tons of Carbon Monoxide, which causes global warming and 2.2 billion tons of warm water, which when released into the sea will bleach corals and destroy marine life.

Thirteen Sri Lankan refugees return from Tamil Nadu¹¹⁴

A total of 13 Sri Lankan refugees, who were living in various camps across the state in Tamil Nadu, left for Colombo on March 15, under the voluntary repatriation programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Twenty-nine Indian fishermen arrested for poaching¹¹⁵

Sri Lanka Coast Guard with the assistance of the Sri Lankan Navy arrested 29 Indian fishermen for allegedly poaching in Sri Lankan waters. The navy said that of the 29 fishermen, nine were arrested North of Thalaimannar and 20 were arrested North-west of Kudiremalai Point. The navy also seized a trawler and three small boats. The fishermen along with the boats were handed over to the

officials of the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources of Thalai-mannar and the Kalpitiya police.

Pakistan and Sri Lanka agree to boost defence ties¹¹⁶

Pakistan and Sri Lanka decided to enhance defence cooperation, the Ministry of Defence Production in Pakistan said. The understanding was reached when the High Commissioner of Sri Lanka in Pakistan Maj. Gen (Retd.) Jayanath Lokuketagodage met the Federal Minister of Defence Production (MoDP) Rana Tanveer Hussain on March 15, 2016. They exchanged views on matters of mutual interest and enhancing cooperation in defence production. Rana Tanveer Hussain also tried to resolve the issue of financial constraint on part of Sri Lanka, which is hindering Sri Lanka to buy heavy products from Pakistan. He gave two solutions, usage of unspent credit line or some organisations may provide finance to Sri Lanka on soft terms.

Sri Lankan President expresses solidarity with Pakistan against terrorism¹¹⁷

Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena condemned March 27 terror attack in Lahore. Calling it as a "dreadful act of cowardice" President Sirisena expressed solidarity with Government of Pakistan in their "hour of grief". The President said it is an "uncompromised" responsibility of South Asian nations to secure the lives of their people. The President expressed condolences to the families and the loved ones of the victims and wished speedy recovery to the injured.

UN notes Lanka at an important stage in its post war recovery¹¹⁸

The Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Adama Dieng said that Sri Lanka is at an important stage in its post war recovery. He told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, during the ongoing 31st session, that Sri Lanka has a chance to make things right by investing in reconciliation and an impartial accountability process that would restore confidence and reduce the risk of recurrence of the past violence. Meanwhile, UN Deputy Spokesman Farhan Haq said that the UN wants to make sure that there is an actual good faith effort by the Government of Sri Lanka when investigating incidents related to the war. He told a daily briefing at the UN Headquarters in New York that the UN is trying to encourage an effort to get to the bottom of what happened in the end of the conflict.

Sri Lankan foreign minister visits Switzerland ¹¹⁹

Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera met Federal Councillor of Switzerland Didier Burkhalter on March 3, 2016 and discussed on the progress in the reform and reconciliation process in Sri Lanka and the expansion of bilateral relations between Switzerland and the Island state in the Indian Ocean. The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs said the two ministers also signed a memorandum of understanding on regular political consultations between representatives of the two states. They also agreed to explore the possibility of a migration partnership between Switzerland and Sri Lanka. This was the first visit by a Sri Lankan foreign minister to Switzerland in more than 30 years.

Secretary General of the IFRC and Red Crescent Societies visits Sri Lanka¹²⁰

The Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) and Red Crescent Societies, Elhadj As Sy paid a courtesy call on President Maithripala Sirisena at the President's Official Residence on March 3, 2016. In the meeting, Elhadj said that he would report to the UN Office in Geneva regarding his positive experiences when visiting former conflict areas. President Sirisena thanked the IFRC and Sri Lanka Red Cross Society for the humanitarian work they have been doing in Sri Lanka for long years responding to situations of natural disasters such as floods, drought and especially during the past tsunami disaster.

State minister of national policy and economic development visits China¹²¹

A Ministerial delegation from Sri Lanka headed by State Minister of National Policy and Economic Development Niroshan Perera left for China to boost ties between both countries, Sri Lanka's National Policy and Economic Development Ministry said on March 9, 2016. The Ministry said that the delegation went to China on the instructions of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and on an invitation from the Chinese government.

Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera visit to the Republic of Korea¹²²

Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera, during his official visit to the Republic of Korea, expressed Sri Lanka's commitment to further strengthen bilateral relations for mutual benefit. Minister Samaraweera's sentiments were reciprocated by his counterpart Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se. The Sri Lankan Foreign Minister was accompanied on the visit by the Minister of Foreign Employment Thalatha Atukorale. This was the first official visit to Korea by a Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka since the inauguration of the government in 2015. During bilateral discussions, the two foreign ministers underscored the importance of Sri Lanka – Korea relations which are longstanding. They also discussed the further consolidation of bilateral ties, including the exchange of high-level visits, in the context of the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations scheduled for 2017. Minister Samaraweera underscored the interest of Sri Lanka to broaden and deepen economic relations with Korea, with particular emphasis on investment and trade.

FM Samaraweera participates at the 37th Session of the SAARC COM¹²³

Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera participated at the thirty- seventh Session of the SAARC Council of Ministers (COM) meeting held in Pokhara, Nepal on March 17, 2016.

Sri Lanka encourages Australia to protect human rights of migrants¹²⁴

Recommending the adoption of Australia's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) outcome at the United Nations Human Right Council (UNHRC) in Geneva on March 17, Sri Lanka urged Australia to protect the human rights of migrants in accordance with its international commitments.

Sri Lankan PM condemns terrorist attacks in Belgium¹²⁵

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe expressing his condolences to the family members of those who died in the terrorist attacks in Belgium on March 22 has strongly condemned the atrocities. In a letter to the Prime Minister of Belgium Charles Michel, Wickremesinghe said he was deeply saddened to hear about the terrorist attack unleashed in Brussels. Sri Lankan Prime Minister said that taking necessary initiatives to wipe out terrorists is the need of the hour.

Kuwait lends Sri Lanka US\$ 34 million to uplift Eastern University¹²⁶

The Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) signed a loan agreement with Sri Lanka on March 24 for approximately US\$34 million to contribute to financing construction of a complex for the Faculty of Healthcare Sciences, Eastern University in Sri Lanka. Secretary to the Ministry of Finance Dr. R.H.S. Samaratunga signed the loan agreement on behalf Sri Lanka. Deputy Director-General of the KFAED, Hesham Al-Waqayan in the presence of the Ambassador of Kuwait to Sri Lanka, Khalaf Bu Dhair, and the Regional Manager for East South Asian and Pacific Countries of Kuwait Fund, Waleed Al-Bahar signed on behalf of the Fund. The project is expected to be completed by the end of 2019. The total cost of the project including prices, taxes and interest reserves during implementation, is estimated at Rs. 7.1 billion. The Fund covers 69 per cent of the total project costs while the Government of Sri Lanka has pledged to cover the remaining costs. The 25-year loan, at an interest rate of one per cent plus 0.5 per cent per annum to meet the costs of administration and implementation of the loan agreement, will have a grace period of five years and is repayable in 40 bi-annual instalments. KAFED has previously extended 13 loans to Sri Lanka, totalling about US\$ 213 million. The fund has also extended technical assistance to Sri Lanka, valued at US\$ 1.52 million, to finance technical and economic feasibility studies for projects in the agricultural and energy sectors.

Deputy foreign minister of Sri Lanka meets his Japanese counterpart¹²⁷

Following a meeting with the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan Hitoshi Kikawada on March 22, Deputy Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka Dr. Harsha de Silva said he had a long discussion with his Japanese counterpart and discussed the "proposed G7 meeting and a host of issues relating to trade, investment, development cooperation and maritime security and defence cooperation between the two countries."

Japan lends Rs. 56 billion to Sri Lanka for expansion of main airport¹²⁸

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) announced on March 28 that it has signed an agreement with Sri Lanka to lend US\$ 400 million (SLR 56 billion) to expand the Bandaranaike International Airport in Colombo. Vice President of JICA Hidetoshi Irigaki and the Chairman of the Airports and Aviation Service Company S. Saman Ediriweera in the presence of Sri Lankan Minister of Transport Nimal Siripala de Silva signed the agreement to provide a Rs. 49 billion line of credit for the project which is estimated to cost Rs. 82 billion. The new passenger terminal building is planned to be opened in 2020 and will enable handling of 15

million passengers a year, more than doubling the present capacity and ease the congestion. According to the agreement, the loan, with 0.1 per cent annual interest, is repayable over 40 years.

Two Japanese naval ships arrive at Sri Lanka's Colombo Port¹²⁹

Sri Lanka Navy, in accordance with naval traditions, welcomed two Japanese naval ships arrived at the Port of Colombo on March 24, 2016. The two Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force ships, "Yuudachi" and "Yuugiri", arrived at the Port of Colombo on a goodwill and replenishment visit.

U.S. naval ship USS Blue Ridge visits Sri Lanka¹³⁰

U.S. naval ship USS Blue Ridge, visited Sri Lanka's Colombo port on a goodwill mission on March 26. This was the first visit by a U.S. Navy ship since October 2011. A reception was held on board the U.S. naval ship USS Blue Ridge, on March 28, 2016. The U.S. Ambassador Atul Keshap, Speaker Karu Jayasuriya, Foreign Affairs Minister Mangala Samaraweera, Commander of Sri Lankan Navy Vice Admiral Ravi Wijegunaratne were among the distinguished guests at the reception. Earlier on the same day, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena visited the USS Blue Ridge. U.S. Ambassador to Colombo Atul Keshap joined President Sirisena on the tour.

SL demonstrates commitment to combat maritime piracy and armed robbery¹³¹

Demonstrating strong commitment to combat maritime piracy and armed robbery at sea in the region, Sri Lanka along with twenty other countries took part in a symposium and a high level meeting held to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) in Singapore on March 18, 2016. The Sri Lankan delegation, led by State Minister of Defence Ruwan Wijewardene, included the Commander of the Sri Lanka Navy Vice Admiral Ravindra C. Wijegunaratne, senior naval officers, and officials from the Ministry of Defence.

Sri Lanka nationwide inflation rises to 1.7 per cent in February 2016¹³²

Sri Lanka's nationwide inflation in February 2016 determined under the new National Consumer Price Index (NCPI) rose to 1.7 per cent from -0.7 per cent recorded in January 2016, on an year-on-year basis, the Department of Census and Statistics reported on March 21. Inflation on an annual average basis in February 2016 was 2.6 per cent.

ADB forecasts less favourable growth prospects for Sri Lanka in 2016¹³³

Weak global demand and uncertainty over policy will continue to hold down Sri Lanka's economic performance in 2016, the Asian Development Bank's flagship annual economic publication, Asian Development Outlook 2016 (ADO) says. The lender of Asia and Pacific region says, "weak demand and low prices for Sri Lanka's major exports will constrain economic growth and exert pressure on the balance of payments, although lower oil prices projected for 2016 will somewhat alleviate the pressure while continued concern over fiscal consolidation will hinder foreign

investment and other capital inflows". The ADB report projects a growth rate of 5.3 per cent in 2016 and 5.8 per cent in 2017 while the inflation is expected to be at 4.5 per cent this year and 5.0 per cent in 2017.

Sri Lanka high level delegation visits WEF as follow-up to Davos Summit¹³⁴

Following the participation of Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and his delegation at the World Economic Forum (WEF) Annual Meeting in Davos in January, a Sri Lankan delegation consisting of senior government officials and representatives from the private sector engaged in a two-day follow-up meeting at the World Economic Forum's headquarters in Geneva. Coordinated by the Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the UN in Geneva, the visit was aimed at strengthening the engagement between Sri Lanka and the WEF and to identify specific areas of engagement. During their visit on March 21-22, the Sri Lanka delegation met Professor Klaus Schwab, Chairman of the World Economic Forum and several Managing Directors and senior teams representing different initiatives of the international organisation. During their stay in Geneva the Sri Lankan delegation held discussions with senior officials and program managers of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) and UN Institute for Research and Training (UNITAR), to explore potential areas for cooperation. On March 23, the Sri Lanka delegation travelled to Bern where they had bi-lateral consultations with officials of Switzerland's State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) led by Christine Busser Mauron, Head, Bilateral Economic Relations Asia/Oceania. The delegation from Sri Lanka was led by Managing Director (Designate), Agency for Development in Ministry of Development Strategies & International Trade Mangala Yapa and included Director General of the Department of Commerce Sonali Wijeratne, Director General of the Department of Agriculture Rohan Wijekoon, Additional Secretary of the Ministry of Industry and Commerce Asitha Seneviratne, Member of the Board of the ICT Agency Ajith Madurapperuma, and Chief Economist of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce Anushka Wijesinha. Sri Lanka's Permanent Representative to the WTO Ambassador R. D. S. Kumararatne, Sri Lanka's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Samantha Jayasuriya and Second Secretary Mafusa Lafir, were also associated in the meetings.

Sri Lanka to get US\$ 1.5 billion IMF loan¹³⁵

Sri Lanka will receive a loan of one and a half billion US dollars from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to boost foreign exchange reserves and avert a balance of payments problem, a government minister said on March 7, 2016. The government was originally looking for a loan of US\$ 2 billion from the global lender, said junior finance minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena. "But now we will get about \$1.5 billion in a number of disbursements," Abeywardena told Reuters. "This is to boost foreign exchange reserves."

Sri Lankan court bans foreign travel for directors of NGO involved in Bangladesh bank heist¹³⁶

Colombo chief magistrate Gihan Pilapitiya ordered the immigration and emigration chief to prevent six Sri Lankan directors of the Shalika Foundation from leaving the country after the police informed courts that the NGO has received some of

the money stolen in a \$101 million hacking from Bangladesh Central Bank's account at the Federal Reserve Bank in New York. Hackers using official messaging codes transferred \$81 million to accounts in Manila, Philippines and \$20 million to the account of the newly formed non-government organisation in Sri Lanka.

Journalists from South meet counterparts in North to build reconciliation¹³⁷

Sri Lanka's Minister of Parliamentary Reforms and Mass Media Gayantha Karunathilaka led a group of journalists from the South to the North to show solidarity with the journalists of the North and build a bridge of goodwill and national reconciliation on March 26, 2016. The 128-member delegation from the South to Jaffna included the Minister, the Deputy Minister the heads of state media institutions, media representatives, and electronic, print and web journalists. In Jaffna, the delegation met the Northern Province Chief Minister C.V. Wigneswaran, Northern Province Governor Reginald Cooray and religious leaders, and visited Nagadeepa Viharaya, Nagapooshani Temple, Jaffna library and the Sri Lanka Air Force base at Palaly and four media institutions, Valampuri, Uthayan, Thinakkural and Dan TV.

Stock of arms found in Sri Lanka's North¹³⁸

Just hours after the police in Jaffna found a haul of explosives and a suicide kit in Chavakachcheri in Jaffna district on March 30, the police recovered another stocks of explosives and weapons at a location in Mannar district in the North. In both occasions the explosives are believed to have been hidden by the Tamil Tiger rebels during the war period. The discovery of arms in the North has raised concerns among the opposition parliamentarians that the Tamil Tiger rebels are regrouping in the North. The opposition charged that the government is concealing the truth behind the weapons discovery and demanded the government to conduct an urgent inquiry and reveal the truth to the public.

People's movement against Port City Project to launch fresh campaign¹³⁹

Following Sri Lankan government's decision to resume the China-funded Colombo Port City Project, a people's movement opposing the project has vowed to launch a fresh campaign against its resumption. The People's Movement against the Port City has demanded Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to immediately halt the project on the grounds that it is detrimental to the country's environment. The Sri Lankan government received the go-ahead from the Cabinet to resume the Port City Project after a comprehensive environmental impact assessment. However, the People's Movement against the Port City says coastal environment will be severely affected as a result of the construction activities of the Port City project.

Resolution on Constitutional Assembly passed by Parliament¹⁴⁰

The resolution on the Constitutional Assembly was passed by Parliament on March 9 with amendments and without a vote. Under the resolution, Parliament will be converted into a Constitutional Assembly to draft a new Constitution.

End Notes

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