

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

With the adoption of the “historic consensus resolution” on Sri Lanka at the 30th session of the UNHRC, international community is now hopeful that positive step will be taken by the current Sri Lankan Government on the reconciliation process. However, the international community have expressed their concern about the declining security situations in Afghanistan and Bangladesh, ongoing fuel crisis due to political unrest in Nepal, and “unjust trial proceeding” of former President of Maldives Mohamed Nasheed. While the respective governments of these countries were urged to take necessary measures to improve their domestic situations, USA has emphasised the necessity to initiate dialogue process between India and Pakistan; and Pakistan and Afghanistan to resolve their bilateral issues for ensuring security and stability in the region. This issue of the South Asia Trends have covered the major political, economic and foreign policy developments in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in the month of October.

Afghanistan

Increase in Taliban offensive in Afghanistan¹

Taliban offensive has increased in Afghanistan in recent months. Two weeks after the resurgent group overran a key northern city, a Taliban suicide car bomber struck a convoy of British forces in central Kabul on October 11. Hundreds of Taliban insurgents reportedly carried out a large-scale attack on Ghurian district in western Herat province on October 20 night and took control of the area for more than two hours. In that time, the Taliban was able to seize the offices of the police, governor and NDS. The Insurgents torched a number of military posts and shops. Reportedly six security force members were killed in the attack. However, after heavy clashes with troops, security forces were able to retake the area. The Taliban also issued strong threats against TOLO TV and 1TV and put these two most-watched channels on their hit list for reporting on the group's crimes around the country. In addition they issued death threats against all staff members and threatened to target the media organisations' facilities. The lawmakers however announced their support to the TV channels and urged the government to take every possible measure to protect the lives of journalists – whom the Taliban declared their “military objectives.” According to military institutions, current information points to the Taliban being in control of eight districts across the country. These are Baghran and Desho districts in Helmand province; Khak-e-Afghan district in Zabul; Nawa district in Ghazni; Ghormach district in Faryab; Qala-e-Zal and Dasht-e-Archi districts in Kunduz and Wardoj district in Badakhshan province. According to the information, there are also some parts that are under serious threat. These include 10 districts in the south, eight districts in the north, five districts in the east and two districts in the west. Each year the Taliban launches its fighting season in spring – however, this year, their tactics were different. Instead of isolated attacks, they now appear to be trying to capture districts. A number of military experts in Afghanistan said government has failed in its war management against the Taliban. “There is no coordination among the security forces and any one can do whatever they desire, there is no one person to ask,” said Attiqullah Amarkhail, a military analyst. However, The Ministry of Interior (MoI) said on October 21 that they have sound plans in place to crack down on Taliban insurgents and once these plans are enforced the Taliban's activities will decrease. Increasing military operations and taking enemy threats seriously are key security plans for the ministry. President Ghani has reportedly, tasked all corps in the country to be ready for serious combat operations. The decision was made during the Afghanistan's National Security Council which was chaired on October 22 by President Ashraf Ghani. A statement released by the office of the President reads that the Council has further ordered Afghan security forces to take serious measures to prevent the threats by anti-government armed groups and civilians casualties during the military operations.

MSF officials meet Ghani over hospital attack²

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) officials on October 9 met with President Ashraf Ghani over the recent deadly air strike by a U.S. AC-130 gunship in the early hours of October 3 on their facility in Kunduz. Held at the presidential palace, the meeting was attended by Christopher Stokes, the MSF General Director; Guilhem Molinie, MSF Country Representative for Afghanistan; Mohammad Hanif Atmar, Ghani's national security advisor; and Abdul Salam Rahimi, head of president's

administrative affairs office. Ghani urged however at the meeting that it was premature to judge the strike unless the investigations are completed, Ghani's office said in a statement. He stressed that the Afghan forces did not get into the hospital and no security force member violated human's rights. Afghanistan's acting defence minister said on October 20 that the Doctors without Borders hospital was being used by insurgents as a "safe place." Doctors Without Borders, also known by its French acronym MSF, has however, repeatedly denied that Taliban fighters were present in the hospital compound at the time of the attack. MSF has acknowledged that it treated wounded Taliban fighters at the Kunduz hospital, but it insists no weapons were allowed in. Afghans who worked there have said that no one was firing from within. MSF officials have blamed the United States, demanding an independent investigation into the incident. This comes after the United States' commander of international forces in Afghanistan Gen. John Campbell said that the airstrike on the hospital had been a mistake.

Ghani, Obama discuss Afghanistan security³

President Ashraf Ghani and United States' President Barack Obama spoke on the phone on October 7 and discussed the MSF Kunduz hospital bombing and the current security situation in Afghanistan. According to a statement issued by the presidential palace the two leaders also discussed the issue of continued cooperation with Afghanistan. Obama expressed his deep condolences over the deaths of MSF staff, doctors and civilians in the Kunduz attack, the statement read. The U.S president said the MSF hospital bombing was not intentional and he ordered a full investigation into the attack. Meanwhile Ghani spoke to him about the security situation – especially in the north – and on Kunduz and the achievements of the security forces. Obama stated that Afghanistan people had dealt with a difficult week and assured Ghani the U.S government and the U.S people will stand by the Afghan people. In addition, Obama said his country will take decisions regarding defence, support and more assistance to the Afghan people in the coming weeks.

UN official warns of alarming humanitarian situation⁴

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs warned of a deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan and appealed to the international community for more help. The UN's humanitarian affairs operational director, John Ging, expressed these statements after his visit to Afghanistan in the wake of an attack on the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital in Kunduz which left 22 people dead, including 12 MSF staff members. He called for more humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan to address the urgent problem. His call came after thousands of families were reportedly displaced from the northern city of Kunduz – the first city Taliban has seized in the past 14 years following their ousting in 2001. The Minister of Refugees and Repatriation Sayed Alimi Balkhi on October 11 said that 20,000 families have been displaced in the Kunduz crisis. Balkhi also added that this could amount to over 100,000 people in total. Addressing a press conference, he said that the displaced people have gone to Baghlan, Takhar, Badakhshan, Mazar-e- Sharif and Kabul provinces. In addition he said his ministry has no budget to help these families. He said they can only register them and try to get aid from government and NGOs. On the Afghan refugee issue, he said that government is focusing on the repatriation of Afghan refugees and that the international community has agreed to help.

Pakistan provides humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan⁵

Pakistan's Ambassador to Afghanistan, Syed Abrar Hussain handed over a consignment, mainly containing wheat flour, to the Deputy Minister/Deputy Chairman of Afghan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) Muhammad Aslam Sayas at Kabul Airport. The consignment carried by A C-130 aircraft was sent on the special instructions of Prime Minister of Pakistan, Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, for the people of Afghanistan on October 30. Pakistani Embassy in Kabul in a press release stated that the Afghan authorities appreciated Pakistan's assistance and thanked the government and people of Pakistan for the humanitarian assistance.

Jihadi leaders form commission to help security⁶

A number of ex-Jihadi leaders and political parties have formed a council to help overcome challenges in war-ravaged Afghanistan. They have also formed a commission to discuss the participation of Jihadi forces (public forces) to help maintain security in the country. The CEO's office meanwhile says it supports the cooperation of public forces for ensuring security in the country, but such decisions should be made in collaboration with security forces. The former Jihadi leaders have named the council as the Council of Jihadi Leaders and Political Parties. They say that the council has a six-member commission that will talk with the National Unity Government (NUG) leaders aimed at discussing the security, economic and political challenges in the country.

US and the NATO allies decide to keep their deployments in Afghanistan at current levels⁷

Germany, Turkey and Italy are set to keep their deployments in Afghanistan at current levels, senior NATO officials said on October 19 after the U.S. government decided to prolong its 14-year-old military presence there. The Taliban's brief takeover of a provincial capital has raised concern about the strength of Afghan state forces and both the United States and its NATO allies now say events, rather than timetables, must dictate gradual troop reductions. Gen. Philip Breedlove, NATO's top commander in Europe, said he had assurances that NATO countries will continue alongside the nearly 10,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. While discussions of exact numbers are still continuing, the biggest national deployments are not in doubt, he said. Although Afghan forces have recaptured the strategic northern city of Kunduz, its brief fall to the Taliban underscored concerns about the capabilities of Afghanistan's security forces. A U.S. military strike in Kunduz that hit an Afghan hospital run by Doctors Without Borders, or Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), also generated international outcry and underscored the perils of leaving a fragile country too quickly.

Britain to keep 450 troops in Afghanistan through 2016⁸

Britain's defence secretary says the country will keep about 450 soldiers in Afghanistan throughout 2016, following a similar announcement by the United States to extend its military presence there. British military personnel will continue to carry out noncombat roles, including the training and support of the Afghan army. The decision follows a review of Britain's commitment "in light of the performance" of Afghan security forces.

Russia to assess Afghan weapons wish list⁹

Russia's Ambassador to Kabul has said that Moscow has received an official "defence wish list" from Kabul for light and heavy weapons and that his country will assess the list. Military helicopters and artillery are included in the wish list submitted by Kabul to Moscow.

Afghan war costs country \$9 billion a year: Equality for Peace and Democracy¹⁰

Afghanistan's war and the fight against extremism cost the country a staggering US\$ 9 billion in 2014, said Equality for Peace and Democracy in its report. The report released by the organisation states that the health sector and infrastructure development have been the hardest hit sectors in the country due to the increased cost of war. This figure is the equivalent of 44 per cent of Afghanistan's GDP. It is approximately 113 per cent of the total of Afghanistan's 2014 national budget, and amounts to roughly four times the Afghan government's revenue collection target for 2014, the report stated. This report was released in cooperation with the United States Institute of Peace, which says this tally, of US\$ 9 billion, is a shocking figure and has warned this amount is set to increase this year.

120,000 Afghans seek asylum in 44 countries: UNHCR¹¹

As the refugee crisis continues in Europe, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) reported that 120,000 Afghan nationals sought asylum in 44 countries during the first eight months of 2015. According to UN statistics, Afghans constitute almost 15 per cent of the total number of 640,000 refugees who reached Europe between January and August. According to critics, security and poverty are what is driving Afghans to flee the country.

Berlin, Kabul start talks on repatriation of Afghans: Merkel¹²

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has said that she has started talks with the Afghan government on the repatriation of Afghan refugees from Germany. Merkel who is a defender of refugees' rights says all refugees including Afghans – with the exception of Syrian refugees - will be expelled from Germany. Figures show that over 50,000 Afghan refugees have entered Germany since the beginning of 2015.

Hasina dismiss claims that ISIS was behind shootings of foreigners¹³

Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, dismissed claims that the Islamic State was behind the fatal shootings of two foreign citizens, instead suggesting that the killings may have been the work of homegrown militants aligned with her political opponents in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (B.N.P.) Bangladesh Nationalist Party acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said irresponsible remarks from the government's top level over the murders of two foreigners will not only create obstacles to investigations but also turn it difficult to identify the assailants.

US committed to fight extremism together with Bangladesh¹⁴

Vouching for concerted effort to combat terrorism and violent extremism, US Ambassador to Bangladesh Marcia Bernicat said the US is determined to work

Bangladesh

together with its partners for the safety and security of their countries. "We have everything we need to fight the emergence of ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) in Bangladesh. We should never underestimate the enemy," she said a day after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina ruled out the possibility of IS presence in Bangladesh. The US envoy's comment follows the murder of two foreign nationals in Bangladesh within a week, which the IS has claimed responsibility for. Bernicat said they were committed to helping Bangladesh government, if asked for help to get to the bottom of the murders.

Foreign missions in Bangladesh seek extra security¹⁵

At least a dozen countries have sought additional security from the Bangladesh government for their diplomats and citizens. The Dhaka missions of these countries, including the US, Australia and Japan, sent letters to the foreign ministry to take steps to this effect since the murder of Italian national Cesare Tavella in Dhaka's diplomatic zone on September 28. Several member states of the European Union asked the government to put in place extra security measures at their missions and offices, and the places where their diplomats and citizens reside or visit.

Government steps satisfy US, France, Italy¹⁶

The USA, France and Italy expressed satisfaction over the security measures taken by the Bangladesh government to ensure safety of foreigners. Marcia Bernicat, US ambassador in Dhaka, said the government of Bangladesh has been extremely responsive to their requests to help ensure foreigners' safety in the face of the current threat. Meanwhile, French Ambassador Sophie Aubert and Italian Ambassador Mario Palma, after their meeting with Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister Rashed Khan Menon, said they were living a normal life without any fear. Italian Ambassador Mario Palma said there is no ban on coming to or living in Bangladesh for Italians.

BSF return 25 Bangladeshis¹⁷

Twenty-five Bangladeshi nationals, arrested by Indian Border Security Force (BSF) on October 17, returned home through Benapole check post on October 18. Indian border guards arrested them while they were crossing the border illegally. Lt Col Abdur Rahim, commanding officer of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) 23 Battalion, said BSF members detained the Bangladeshis from Jhaudanga bordering area for entering India without valid documents.

Hasina wants Indo-Bangla joint venture for developing Ganges Barrage¹⁸

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stressed developing Ganges Barrage on the Padma River in Bangladesh under a joint venture project between Bangladesh and India. She came up with the view when outgoing Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Pankaj Saran met her at her office on October 25. The government has already completed the feasibility study and design of the proposed 2.1km long Ganges Barrage Project at Pangsha in Rajbari, some 98km downstream from the Farakka Barrage built in West Bengal. The proposed project has a reservoir to augment the flow of water and its equal distribution, in both dry and rainy seasons, over the Ganges-dependent area. The project will meet the demand of Ganges

water for agriculture, fisheries, ecosystem and navigation. About US\$4 billion is needed to implement the project.

Bangladesh slips two spots in WB's doing business rankings¹⁹

Bangladesh dropped two positions to 174 in the World Bank's (WB) ranking of the ease of doing business due to stalled regulatory reforms.

Sea level rising up to 20 mm a year: Department of Environment study report²⁰

The annual rise of sea level in Bangladesh ranges between 6 mm and 20 mm, posing threats to the country's agriculture, land and population, according to a Department of Environment study. The study, conducted between April 2013 and October 2015, analysed tidal water data of the last 30 years in the entire coastal zones of the country. According to the study carried for the first time in Bangladesh with its own capacity, the sea level rises 7 to 8 mm a year in the western coastal region including Satkhira, Khulna and Barisal. The rise is 6 to 9 mm annually in the central coastal region, which covers Noakhali, Laxmipur and their adjacent districts while 11 to 20 mm rise has been observed in the coastal areas of Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar.

18 Bangladeshi peacekeepers freed²¹

South Sudan rebels on October 29, released 18 Bangladeshi peacekeepers they had taken captive, but were still holding 12 UN contractors captured along with them on the Nile River. The 18 Bangladeshi soldiers were later flown out of Kaka by UN helicopter to Malakal. Around 100 heavily-armed rebels backed by two tanks on October 26 detained the crew of a barge carrying fuel for the UN mission, along with the peacekeepers escorting the shipment. The peacekeepers and the crew were captured north of Malakal, and taken to the town of Kaka, in Upper Nile state.

Bangladesh elected as new chair of the Global Coordination Bureau of the LDCs²²

Bangladesh has been elected the new Chairman of the Global Coordination Bureau of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). The new Chairman was ceremonially handed over the responsibility of leading the 49 LDCs at New York on October 1. State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam formally took over the role from the Minister of MDGs and SDGs of Benin, the immediate past Chairman of the Group.

Bhutan

Bhutan renews commitment to conserve environment²³

Foreign Minister Damcho Dorji deposited Bhutan's Instrument of Acceptance to the Doha Amendment to the Kyoto Protocol (KP) on September 28 on the sidelines of the UNGA in New York, representing a strong affirmation of Bhutan to remain committed in conservation and preservation of the environment. Bhutan signed the protocol in 1997 and submitted its acceptance on August 22, 2002. The Doha Amendment to the KP is the second commitment period from 2013-2020 after the first commitment expired in 2012. The second commitment aims to reduce GHG emissions by 18 per cent below the 1990 level. Bhutan ratified the Doha

Amendment to the KP in the fourth session of the National Assembly and the 15th session of the National Council in 2015.

COP21, the litmus test for action on climate change: Foreign Minister²⁴

Implementing the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, which for one, seeks to end poverty and hunger in the next 15 years, will be a daunting challenge, especially for least developed and landlocked countries like Bhutan. This was pointed out by Foreign Minister Damcho Dorji, in his address to the 70th session of the UN general assembly on October 2. "For a country like Bhutan, that is least developed and landlocked, addressing the challenges will require innovative and creative approaches to build on the progress we've achieved thus far," Lyonpo said. A key challenge would be building a sustainable green economy that gainfully employs the youth, is inclusive, and promotes self-reliance. "With a narrow industrial base and a high dependency on a single sector, our economy is faced with unprecedented macroeconomic challenges despite prolonged periods of robust growth," he said. "A careful reorientation of our economy is imperative if we're to ensure that our future development is inclusive and sustainable as envisaged in the 2030 agenda," he added.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee visits Bhutan²⁵

Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee made her first visit to Bhutan from October 5 to 9 at the invitation of the Prime Minister Tsering Tobgay. In her meeting with Prime Minister Tobgay on October 5, the two leaders held discussion on the second international gate and the customs centre at the Jaigoan-Phuentsholing international border. She received an audience with the Druk Gyalpo on October 6. Discussions during the meeting touched on further strengthening cooperation and enhancing the very ties that exist between Bhutan and West Bengal. The two leaders have renewed their commitment to pursue the Golden Jubilee Railway line from Hashimara to Bhutan, which was earlier halted due to land acquisition problems in West Bengal. Mamata Banerjee also attended a Business Conclave on October 5 in Thimphu. In the Conclave the representative from Graphite India, which manufactures graphite electrodes proposed to set up a factory in Bhutan. The Economic Affairs Minister of Bhutan, Norbu Wangchuk approved the proposal from Graphite India. Although a part of the product would be produced in India, he said the finishing, which is power intensive, could be done in Bhutan where electricity comes cheap. Keventer agro, the manufacturer of Frooti and Appy beverages, also showed interest to set up a factory in Bhutan. The bulk of the product, however, would be exported back to India and neighbouring countries. The company has already kept aside funds to start right away but the company's representative said if Bhutan is revisiting its economic development policy, it should also consider allowing 100 per cent FDI. The West Bengal government has declared a 100 per cent sales tax exemption on aviation turbine fuel until 2021 for flights refueling there. She urged Bhutan to take advantage of this. Mamata Banerjee also asked the Chamber of Commerce and Industries of the two countries to explore business corridor for tourism, small industries and joint venture projects. Mamata Banerjee offered land in her state, should Bhutanese wish to set up industries with fast track registration. She said it would be in the interest of metal industries in West Bengal, if Bhutan exports dolomite and limestone.

“Continued support critical for Bhutan”, says Information minister at global ICT event²⁶

Continued collaboration and support from other countries is critical for small developing countries like Bhutan, that is constrained with high internet connectivity costs and reliability issues given geographical conditions, it was pointed out by the Information And Communications Minister, DN Dhungyel at the ministerial roundtable at the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) Telecom World 2015 on October 13 held in Budapest, Hungary. ITU Telecom World is a global ICT innovation event for small medium enterprises, corporations, and governments. Bhutan became the member of the ITU in 1988 and since then the ITU has been playing a critical role in Bhutan’s ICT Journey. Till date, over thirty projects and technical assistance has been received. Lyonpo DN Dhungyel led the Bhutanese delegation to the event.

Bhutan easiest country to do business in South Asia²⁷

The World Bank Group has ranked Bhutan 71 among 189 economies around the world in its annual Doing Business 2016 report released on October 28. Last year, Bhutan was ranked 125, and with the 54 notches up the ladder, Bhutan is now the easiest country to do business in South Asia. The government last year had established a task force chaired by the economic affairs minister with cross-sectoral membership including the private sector to review and recommend reforms in ease of doing business. Doing Business report focuses on regulations and regulatory processes involved in setting up and operating a business. The report observes that Bhutan instituted two significant reforms during the past year. In getting electricity, Bhutan made it easier for entrepreneurs to connect to the grid by speeding up the process for obtaining a new connection. A press release from the World Bank states that five years ago, it took an entrepreneur 93 days to get electricity, now it only takes 61, less time than in France. Bhutan also implemented a reform in the registering property indicator through which transferring property has been streamlined by introducing a computerized land information system. This initiative has decreased the time to complete a transfer by 15 days.

Bhutan gets its first Chopper²⁸

In a historic development for the aviation industry in Bhutan, the country’s first helicopter sporting the country’s national flag, touched down at Paro international airport on October 30, 2015. The helicopter, an Airbus H130, arrives ahead of a November 4, the expected delivery date. The helicopter services are on schedule to be launched on November 5. The government plans to use the helicopters for search and rescue, air medical evacuations, fire fighting, moving cargo, transport of VIPs and government officials, and possibly even for tourism, among others. The second helicopter is expected to arrive sometime mid-next year.

Maldives

Ban Ki-moon calls on Maldives to grant clemency to Nasheed²⁹

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has urged Maldives to grant clemency to former President Mohamed Nasheed. This came during a meeting between the Secretary-General and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Maldives Dunya Maumoon on September 30, 2015, on the sidelines of the UN General Debate at

the UN Headquarters. According to UN, Ban Ki-moon also encouraged the government to take strong ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and stressed the vital role of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the climate change process, leading up to Paris in December.

Foreign Minister participates in an informal meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers at the UN³⁰

Foreign Minister, Dunya Maumoon has said that the efforts from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have to move ahead with far greater speed and will. Speaking at an informal meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers at the U.N. General Assembly in New York, Minister Dhunya said that the importance of the organisation has grown. She said that the Maldives fully supports the reform of SAARC processes and mechanisms that are underway. The Minister said that she hopes that the host of the new SAARC Environment and Disaster Management Centre will be decided soon.

Dunya Maumoon meets with her Italian counterpart³¹

Minister of Foreign Affairs Dunya Maumoon met with her Italian counterpart, Paolo Gentiloni. The meeting took place on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, on October 1, 2015. The two ministers discussed furthering bilateral cooperation and promoting investment between the two countries, and exchanged views on working closely towards achieving a strong climate agreement in Paris. Permanent Representative of Maldives to the UN Ahmed Sareer, and Joint Secretary Farzana Zahir participated in the meeting.

VP reiterates commitment to strengthening relations with Saudi Arabia³²

Vice President Ahmed Adeb has highlighted the friendship between Maldives and Saudi Arabia, and reiterated the Maldives' commitment to a future of sustained and enhanced relations between the two countries. Adeb made this remark while speaking at a reception in Paradise Island Resort on October 1, 2015 to commemorate Saudi Arabia's 85th National Day.

National reserve rises to US\$ 667.4 million³³

The National Reserve of the Maldives rose to US\$ 667.4 million at the end of August 2015. The financial review publicised by the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) shows the National Reserve rising to US\$ 667.4 million which is a 23 per cent increase from 2014. The National Reserve was at 692.5 million at the end of July.

Indian Minister of External Affairs visits Maldives³⁴

The Indian Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj made a visit to the Maldives upon invitation of Maldivian Foreign Minister, Dunya Maumoon on October 10 to participate in the fifth Maldives-India Joint Commission. During the visit, the Indian External Minister met with President Abdulla Yamin on October 11 and discussed the relationship between the two countries. A press release issued by the Indian High Commission said that President Yamin requested to India to host an Investors Forum for Maldivian investors. Trade, connectivity, education, health and heritage relations between the two countries were discussed along with the

environment at the Maldives-India Joint Commission meeting. The joint commission between India and the Maldives was formed in 1986 to support and strengthen relations between the two countries. Outside the meeting of the Joint Commission, the two countries signed two MoUs to provide support for the Maldivian sports and the Foreign Institute which is under the Foreign Ministry. The Indian High Commission said that the Maldives pledge support in India's effort to become a member of the U.N. Security Council in the talks between the officials of the two countries. Sushma Swaraj also met with the leader of the MDP parliamentary group, Ibrahim Mohamed Soalih.

WGAD has called for the release and compensate President Nasheed³⁵

The U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) has said that the trial of the former President, Mohamed Nasheed proceeded unjustly and has called for the release of the former President and enforce the right to compensation. The WGAD made the statement in a report after reviewing the case submitted by the former President's lawyers. The report publicised by Jared Genser of the President's legal team notes a number of things that are considered unjust during the trial. The report notes that some of the judges that could affect the trial being part of the trial and not giving adequate time to prepare a defence and the former President not having a lawyer at some point of the trial. The other thing noted by the WGAD is not giving the opportunity to assign a lawyer once the original lawyers left the case. It is also noted that only a few number of people were allowed inside the court room for the hearings. The WGAD believes that the former president was deprived of a fair trial along with the right to prove his innocence. The report also says that the Criminal Court's decision to sentence the former President to 13 years in prison was unfair. Speaking at a press conference on October 5, lawyer Ibrahim Riffath of the former President's defence team said that international treaties signed by the Maldives makes it compulsory for the government to obey the decision made by the UNWGAD. Ministry of Foreign Affairs however, has rejected the UNWGAD decision. The ministry said that the UN cannot make a decision on a case which is going through the legal process of the Maldives, on which the highest court has not yet issued a verdict. Meanwhile Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) National Council passed a resolution calling for sanctions against the government's rejection of the UNWGAD's decision. Later MDP held a march in Male calling for the release of former president Mohamed Nasheed. Speaking at the event, MP Rozaina Adam said that the purpose of the march was not only to call for Nasheed's release, but also demand basic human rights for the general public.

Special envoy of the President of Egypt meets Vice President Adeeb³⁶

Special Envoy of the President of Egypt, Hatam El Sayed Tageldin, has expressed concern on behalf of Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and the Egyptian Government, over the blast on the presidential speedboat in the Maldives. Tageldin paid a courtesy call on Vice President Ahmed Adeeb at the President's Office on October 5. Tageldin delivered a letter to President Abdulla Yameen on behalf of President Sisi, in which the Egyptian Head of State detailed Egypt's candidature for a Non-Permanent Seat in the UN Security Council for the upcoming term. Vice

President Adeb led conveyed on behalf of President Yameen, the assurance of Maldives' support for Egypt's candidature vote scheduled for October 15, 2015 in New York.

Japan to provide \$20 million for broadcasting service development³⁷

Communications Authority of Maldives (CAM) has announced that the government of Japan has agreed to provide free aid worth \$20 million for the development of broadcasting service in the Maldives. CEO of CAM Ilyas Ahmed said at a ceremony held on October 8 to sign the minutes of discussion of a project to establish Integrated Services Digital Broadcasting-Terrestrial (ISDB-T) in the Maldives, that studies related to this donation from Japan are ongoing. The minutes of discussion was signed on behalf of Maldives by Minister of Home Affairs Umar Naseer, and on behalf of Japan by Team Leader of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Jotaro Tateyama.

Vice President Adeb led visits China³⁸

Maldivian Vice President Ahmed Adeb led Abdul Gafoor left for China on an official visit on October 12 to attend a conference of Asian political parties. Vice President Ahmed Adeb led met with Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao during the visit. Chinese state media Xinhua News Agency said that during the meeting, Adeb led assured that Maldives is willing to participate in the construction of the "Belt and Road" as well as enhance cooperation with China in tourism and fishery.

Maldives committed to expand partnership with China, says Dunya³⁹

Minister of Foreign Affairs Dunya Maumoon said that the Government of President Abdulla Yameen is committed to expanding the partnership between Maldives and China to new levels. She made this remark in a message to Minister of Foreign Affairs of China Wang Yi on the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of bilateral relations between the Maldives and China. The message read: "The Maldives attaches special significance to its relations with China. The Maldives' unwavering commitment to the One China policy, and our shared perspectives in addressing international issues of mutual interests have helped the bilateral relationship to thrive for the benefit of the peoples of our two countries. China is now one of the most important development and trade partners of the Maldives. The Government of President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom is committed in expanding that partnership to new levels".

Religious freedom report 2014 encouraged Maldivian Government to respect right to religious freedom⁴⁰

The US has said in its International Religious Freedom Report 2014, published on October 14, that the US Embassy encouraged the Maldivian government to respect the right to religious freedom. The report noted that there is no US permanent presence in the Maldives, and all engagement with the government and civil society was conducted by visiting staff of the US Embassy in Sri Lanka, who travelled to Maldives frequently. The report read: "The embassy also engaged the government on efforts to promote tolerance and reduce violent extremist rhetoric or derogatory statements about other religions, specifically on government efforts to counter the

rise of what it characterised as radical Islam. After demonstrations that included anti-Israel messages and those in favour of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, embassy officials engaged the government on strategies to combat intolerance.”

Moosa Ali Jaleel removed from the defense ministerial post⁴¹

President Abdulla Yameen has removed Major General (Retired) Moosa Ali Jaleel from his post as defense minister. The decision was announced in a tweet sent out by President’s Office Spokesperson Ibrahim Muaz Ali on October 13. The tweet did not reveal any reason as to why Moosa Ali Jaleel was relieved of his duties. The decision came after an explosion took place on the presidential speedboat leaving First Lady Fathimath Ibrahim in the hospital with injuries to her back. President Abdulla Yameen has appointed Adam Shareef as Minister of Defence and National Security. Until now, Adam Shareef held the post of Minister of State for Education. Adam Shareef was sworn in at a ceremony at President’s Office on October 28. The oath was administered by Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed.

Maldives Vice-President Adeeb arrested⁴²

The vice-president of the Maldives was arrested in connection with an alleged plot to assassinate the president on his return from China on October 24.

Maldives population surpasses 400,000⁴³

The official figures of the census conducted in 2014, announced on October 20, show that the total number of people living in the Maldives is 402,071, of which 338,434 are Maldivians and 63,637 are foreigners. The total population of Maldivians is 344,023, of which 166,472 are women and 171,962 are men. The ratio of women to men is 100 to 103. The number of Maldivians living abroad is 5,589. The most populous atolls are Addu atoll, Haa Dhaalu atoll, Raa atoll, Haa Alifu atoll, and Kaafu atoll. The least populous atoll, with a population of 1,601, is Vaavu atoll. Over one-third or 38 per cent of the population lives in Male. The number of people living in Male is 153,904, of which 129,381 are Maldivians. The last census was done in 2006, at which time population stood at 298,968. This constitutes a growth rate of 1.65 per cent between 2006 and 2014. Children make up 28 per cent of the population, the age-group 18-34 make up 35 per cent, and people above 65 make up five per cent. The dependent population is 48 per cent.

U.N. has failed to stop Israel’s subjugation of Palestinians: Foreign Secretary⁴⁴

The Maldives said that the United Nations (U.N.) has failed to stop the Israel’s subjugation of Palestinians and urged the U.N. Security Council to take firm measures to end Israel’s illegal occupation, and its apartheid practices in Palestine. Speaking at the U.N. Security Council Open Debate on the Middle East including the Question of Palestine, Foreign Secretary Dr. Ali Naseer Mohamed, stated that “the U.N. has been a force for good for the entire humanity and helped in ending conflicts and in making peace. And yet, the U.N. has been helpless in ending Israel’s subjugation of Palestinians and Israel’s continued illegal occupation of Palestine epitomises a deep malaise in the international system that we have to address.” Foreign Secretary Dr. Ali Naseer reflected on the recent violence that has broken out in Palestine and stated that it painted a bleak picture. The Maldives

also raised concerns on the thousands of Israeli settlers who move into the occupied territories of Palestine illegally each year, and stated that the combination of increasingly belligerent political rhetoric, coupled with the enforced physical and demographic changes to the occupied Palestinian territories continually reduce the chances for peace.

President ratifies Anti-Terrorism Bill⁴⁵

President Abdulla Yameen has ratified the Anti-Terrorism Bill. The bill, submitted to parliament by Ihavandhoo MP Mohamed Abdulla, aims to make the Terrorism Act, which came into force in 1990, more relevant to current international standards and the present situation. Acts which shall be construed as terrorism, as defined in the bill are: 1) the act of killing or causing bodily harm or intent to carry out such actions to persons, with the intention of creating fear or terror, or with a political motive; 2) the act or intention of kidnapping or abduction of persons or of taking hostages; 3) the act of causing harm or damage to persons or property; 4) the act or intention of hijacking of vessels or vehicles; 5) the act of causing health risks to a group of people or the general public. It further states that the act of terrorism also includes distribution, circulation, sale, display, and broadcast of documents created by terrorist organisations, and the penalty for this crime shall be prison for a period between seven and ten years. Sharing such information via TV, radio, or internet is also a crime, which carries a prison sentence of between ten and 15 years; as is encouraging or supporting terrorist agendas, which carries a prison sentence of between 17 and 20 years.

Nepal

KP Sharma Oli elected as new Prime Minister of Nepal⁴⁶

CPN-UML Chairman KP Sharma Oli was elected as the 38th prime minister of the country, securing a clear majority of votes in parliament on October 11. Oli had defeated Nepali Congress (NC) President and outgoing Prime Minister Sushil Koirala by 89 votes, in the election held at a House meeting. Chief of the second largest political party in parliament, Oli secured 338 votes while Koirala succeeded in getting only 249 votes, from the 587 lawmakers participating in the voting. Nine lawmakers were absent during the meeting, including four from NC and one from UML. Oli's contender Koirala was supported by the United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF) and a few other fringe parties. The UDMF, which comprises four Madhes-based parties, has 35 seats in parliament. Eight political parties with single parliamentary seats and two independent lawmakers voted for Koirala. Newly elected Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli took oath of office and secrecy amidst a special program organised at President Bhawan, Sheetal Niwas on October 12. President Dr. Ram Baran Yadav administered oath and secrecy of the post to newly elected PM Oli. On the occasion, President Yadav also administered oath of office and secrecy to Chairman of the Madhesi People's Right Forum-Democratic Bijaya Kumar Gachchhadar and Chairman of Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal (RPP-N) Kamal Thapa as Deputy Prime Ministers. Likewise, Som Prasad Pandey, Haribol Gajurel, Ram Kumar Subba, Agni Kharel and Satya Narayan Mandal also received oath of office and secrecy from President Yadav as ministers. Gajurel represents UCPN (Maoist) and Subba represents RPP-N in the cabinet while Pandey, Kharel and Mandal represent UML. As soon as Oli became Nepal's 38th prime minister, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated and invited

him to visit India. Ambassador of India to Nepal, Ranjit Rae, Chinese ambassador to Nepal Wu Xunthai, the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Kathmandu, the UK Minister of State for Asia, Hugo Swire, Pakistan's Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif extended their congratulations and best wishes to newly-elected Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli.

Nepal gets its first woman president⁴⁷

CPN-UML leader Bidya Devi Bhandari has been elected the first woman president of Nepal, securing 327 votes in the election held at Legislature-Parliament in Nayabaneshwor, Kathmandu on October 28. Bhandari's rival candidate Nepali Congress leader Kul Bahadur Gurung secured 214 votes. Ruling CPN-UML, UCPN (Maoist), Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal, ML, and Madhesi Janadhikar Forum Loktantrik, among other political parties, supported Bhandari in the election. The lawmakers of Samyukta Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha boycotted the election. The United States congratulated Bidhya Devi Bhandari on her historic election as Nepal's first female President. Nanda Kishor Pun alias Pasang has been elected as the vice president of the country, the only second person to have graced the post in the country's history.

Talks held between the major three political parties and the Madhesi front⁴⁸

Talks between the major three political parties and the United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF) held in Singha Durbar to settle current political deadlock has ended without striking any chords on October 7. In the meeting held at the office of the State Affairs Committee, the government floated the proposal to settle the dispute related to state restructuring through the political consensus based on the report of the federal commission, said talks team member of the government side Narayan Kaji Shrestha. But the UDMF held that the issue of delineation of provinces should be settled immediately.

Government registers amendments to new constitution⁴⁹

The government of Nepal has registered an amendment bill at the parliament secretariat with a view to address two major demands of the agitating Madhesi political parties. The government in the bill has proposed making changes to four articles of the new constitution to address the demands of the Madhesi parties, who want proportional and inclusive representation in state bodies. The other provision proposed for change is related to delineation of electoral constituencies as demanded by the Madhesi parties. The term "Based on proportional inclusive principle" in Article 42 will be replaced by "based on inclusive principle", reads the amendment bill registered by Minister for Law and Justice Narahari Acharya at the parliament secretariat on October 7. Also, the government has proposed amendment to Article 84 relating to delineation of electoral constituencies to elect members of the Lower House of Representatives. In this article, the bill has proposed to replace the phrase "based on geography and population" with "based on population and geographic convenience and uniqueness". The government has also proposed replacing Clause 5 of Article 286 relating to constituency delimitation. The government has rephrased the wordings of the article. As in the existing provision, the amendment has also proposed taking both population and geography

as the bases to delineate electoral constituencies in the new federal set up. But the amendment has rephrased the words to place emphasis on population. While the existing provision states “while taking population and the geography as the bases for representation”, the amendment says “while taking mainly population as the basis”. Also, the bill has proposed retaining at least one electoral constituency in each of the existing 75 districts.

Government team holds informal talks with Thakur⁵⁰

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Kamal Thapa-led government talks team has held an informal meeting with Tarai Madhes Loktantrik Party (TMLP) Chairman Mahantha Thakur. The government team including Minister Thapa and Ministers Rekha Sharma and Ramjanam Chaudhary went to TMLP party office in Bijulibazaar on October 20. Another member Law Minister Agni Kharel could not attend the meeting as he was in Jhapa district. “The meeting was to create a conducive environment for formal talks with the agitating Madhesi parties,” said Minister without portfolio Ramjanam Chaudhary. Madhesi talks team members Laxmanlal Karn and Lalbabu Raut, who are out of valley, were not present in the meeting. “We will sit for talks again once they (Karn and Raut) return to valley,” said Minister Chaudhary. Before sitting for talks and entering into political matters, Thakur reiterated that the pre conditions of lifting prohibitory zones, recalling Nepal Army and Armed Police Force to barracks, declaring the deceased as martyrs and compensating their family should be met.

Talks with government failed: Upendra Yadav⁵¹

Sanghiya Samajwadi Forum Nepal Chairman Upendra Yadav has reiterated their demands for a single Madhes province in Tarai after claiming that the talks with the government have failed. He claims that if single Madhes province is not possible, Tarai could be federated into two states with Tharuhat Madhes in Western Tarai. This is the bottom line proposed by Yadav.

Deputy PM and foreign minister of Nepal meets Indian Prime Minister⁵²

Deputy Prime Minister (PM) and Foreign Minister Kamal Thapa met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on October 26. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi advised Foreign Minister Kamal Thapa to resolve Nepal’s internal matters by addressing the grievances in the Tarai. In a meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Thapa in New Delhi Prime Minister Modi said he was aware of the difficulties Nepal has been facing in the supply of essentials from India due to the obstruction on the border. He urged the government of Nepal to ensure security in the border region for removing the blockage. Minister Thapa, who arrived in New Delhi on October 24 on a three-day official visit to draw the attention of the Indian Government to the crisis in Nepal following the “unofficial blockade by India”, claimed that he was able to present the ground reality to Indian officials. He said he was assured that the import and supply of essentials would become smooth gradually. Public life and movement in Nepal has been crippled due to the import disruption from India that has continued for about a month. “There is no obstruction in the supply and export of goods from India to Nepal,” Thapa quoted Modi as telling him during the meeting. “Nepal’s government should take initiatives

to clear the entry points. Then measures will be taken on the Indian side to send the supplies from open passes." During a bilateral meeting at the Indian PM's official residence in 7 Race Course road, Nepali Ambassador to India Deep Kumar Upadhyay and Indian Ambassador to Nepal Ranjit Rae were also present. Talking to the media after the meeting, Minister Thapa said his visit was successful in removing mutual misunderstanding between the two countries. He said he got hints that Delhi would take initiatives immediately to ease the crisis caused by the obstruction of essential supplies. Thapa, who met India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, Home Minister Rajnath Singh and India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval on October 25, had received clear indications that relations between the two countries would not improve without addressing the problems in Madhes. In the high-level meetings, concerns were raised about the delay in constitution amendment to address the grievances of the Madhesi/Tharu groups over the delineation of federal states. Even after the meeting with the Indian PM, Nepali officials read indications that the "unofficial blockade" would linger. Indian officials assured of increased supplies from other entry points while expressing their reluctance to resume cargo movement via Raxaul-Birgunj. Nearly 70 per cent of the fuel imported in Nepal comes via Raxaul.

India denies halting pension to ex-Indian Gurkhas⁵³

India has denied halting pension payments to former Gurkha soldiers. Responding to a report run by *The Kathmandu Post*, the Indian embassy in Kathmandu issued a statement and said that the payment date was only rescheduled and not halted. The statement reads that the Pension Paying Camps were conducted at Gorkha, Turture, Besisahar, Palpa, Bhojpur and Tehrathum in the months of September and October 2015 while those in Surkhet, Kohalpur and Dang were rescheduled to the month of December because of the unrest in Surkhet and its surrounding areas. The embassy said that it regards pension disbursement be always in the safety and convenience of the pensioners, many of whom move over long distances to reach the Pension Camps.

EU issue's statement on Nepal⁵⁴

Chair of the European Parliament Delegation for relations with the countries of South Asia, Jean Lambert, has highlighted the need for regional solidarity in this new phase of Nepal's development. In a press statement, Lambert said, "the unofficial blockade" at the Nepali border only serves to hurt the Nepali people who are still recovering from the devastating earthquakes earlier this year." She stated that the fuel shortages as a result of the blockade were also having an impact on tourism in what is usually the peak season in Nepal, causing further damage to the economy of the country and the livelihoods of many. Lambert welcomed reports that Prime Minister KP Oli was seeking talks with Madheshi groups to address grievances with the constitution, and called on India - as a good neighbour to help ensure essential supplies reach Nepal and that cross-border trade is not impeded.

Nepal seals first oil trade deal with China⁵⁵

A visiting Nepali delegation on October 28 reached a formal agreement with the Chinese authorities to import fuel from China, ending a four-decade supply

monopoly of Indian Oil Corporation. The visiting delegation signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Chinese government. "Now the door has been opened to import fuel from China. A bilateral agreement has been reached for the same," Nepali Ambassador to China Mahesh Maskey, told this to the media. China had pledged to provide 1000 metric ton (1,300 kilolitres) of fuel to fuel-strapped Nepal in grant. Meanwhile, a group of students took out a rally in Kaliaya on October 28, against what they term as China's move to help Nepal to end the fuel crisis as a strategy to influence Tarai agitation. The students protested against China's decision to support the government's policy to procure fuel from china instead of trying to end the crisis through talks with agitating Madhes-based parties. They were against the government's failure to end the long-drawn-out strikes in Tarai districts. The Samyukta Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha (SLMM) has been enforcing strike in the Tarai region against the demarcation of state borders in the new federal set-up.

Leaders Shrestha, Gyawali and Koirala visit China⁵⁶

UCPN (Maoist) Vice-Chair Narayan Kaji Shrestha, CPN (UML) Secretary Pradip Gyawali and Nepali Congress leader Sujata Koirala left for China on October 13, to participate in the standing committee meeting of the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAP) on October 15.

Nepal-China border reopens⁵⁷

The Rasuwagadhi-Kerung border point, which remained closed following the April 25 earthquake, reopened on October 15. The road leading to the border was severely damaged by the earthquake and monsoon rains. It is one of the two major trade routes between Nepal and China, with the other being Tatopani-Khasa route. Officials from both countries participated in the reopening of the border point. Joint Secretary at the Commerce and Supply Ministry Jib Raj Koirala, representatives of foreign, finance and home ministries, chief district officer of Rasuwa, border security force personnel and customs chief of Rasuwa attended the ceremony. Deputy general secretary of China on Tibet affairs, Chinese embassy counsellor, officials from Chinese customs, immigration and quarantine offices were also present. Officials of both countries insisted on operating the border points in a coordinated manner. On the occasion, China handed over half a dozen trucks laden with salt, rice and cooking oil worth Rs 16 million for quake victims. The closure of the two major Nepal-China border points since the earthquake adversely affected bilateral trade. The Chinese side also held talks with Rasuwa's Chief District Officer Shiva Ram Gelal and Customs chief Kedar Paneru to discuss on easing trade and removing barriers for smooth operation of the border point.

Committee formed to prepare draft of govt's Minimum Common Programme⁵⁸

A five-member committee has been formed to prepare draft of the government's Minimum Common Programme (MCP). A meeting between top leaders of ruling coalition partners held at the Prime Minister's official residence in Baluwatar formed the Committee on October 24. CPN-UML Vice-Chairman Bhim Rawal, UML standing committee member Shankar Pokhrel, UCPN (Maoist) standing committee member Barsha Man Pun, Madhesi Janadhikar Forum-Loktantrik Vice-Chairman

Jitendra Dev and Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal (RPP-N) central member Suresh Acharya are the members of the Committee. Talking to media persons after the meeting, senior UML leader Jhala Nath Khanal said the meeting held in the presence of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and UCPN (Maoist) Chairman and Coordinator of the High-Level Political Mechanism (HLPM) Pushpa Kamal Dahal discussed the MCP in a preliminary phase. The Committee was formed as per the decision of the HLPM held on October 20.

ADB approves \$15 million aid to help quake-hit districts⁵⁹

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a new \$15 million grant to rebuild schools, provide micro loans to help restore livelihoods, and to boost awareness of disasters in the 14 districts most severely affected by the recent earthquakes in Nepal. The grant is provided by the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction, a fund set up by the Japanese government in 2000 to support poverty reduction and social development in ADB projects. ADB will manage the grant.

USAID and NSET-N launch \$8 million reconstruction project⁶⁰

The Government of Nepal, with financial and technical support from USAID and National Society of Earthquake Technology-Nepal (NSET-N), has initiated a five-year Baliyo Ghar (Strong House) project aimed at training engineers, local masons, carpenters and earthquake-affected homeowners towards building earthquake-resilient houses in the future. Under the project worth \$8 million, a National Reconstruction Technology Centre and three training centres at the district and local levels in Dolakha, Dhanding and Nuwakot districts will be established to train the targeted groups towards building a safer community to earthquake-related disasters, including building safer housing structures. Baliyo Ghar will be implemented by NSET-N in cooperation with Ministry of Urban Development, Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development, Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training, and National Planning Commission. During a programme organised on October 28 to announce the launch of various projects in Nepal including the Baliyo Ghar, US ambassador to Nepal Alaina B. Teplitz pledged continued help to rebuild a safer and stronger Nepal. USAID has further decided to expand its ongoing resilience project, Sabal, through increased investment of \$2.7 million to train local masons in Sindupalchok and Kavrepalanchok districts, the most-affected districts in the April earthquake in 2015. In addition, USAID has made a \$9.6 million contribution to World Bank Nepal Earthquake Reconstruction Multi-Donor Trust Fund. This contribution will directly support government-led beneficiary survey in the 14 most-affected districts and provide housing reconstruction cash grants to affected homeowners, NSET stated. The support from the US government is a part of its commitment to invest \$130 million in response to the earthquake in Nepal.

Sixth 'Made In Pakistan Expo' in Kathmandu⁶¹

The 6th Made in Pakistan Exhibition has kicked off in Kathmandu from October 6. Inaugurating the exhibition in the United World Trade Centre in Kathmandu, former Governor Himalaya Shumsher Rana, also chairman of the Nepal-Pakistan Friendship and Cultural Association, said that he believes the exhibition of Pakistan-

Pakistan

made products in the Nepali market would help strengthen age-old relations of both Nepal and Pakistan further. On the occasion, Arshed Saud Khosa, Pakistani ambassador to Nepal, said that Pakistani products have quality suitable for use in Nepal. "The expo would help enhance the relations of both Nepal and Pakistan," he said.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif meets President Obama⁶²

After a two-hour long meeting between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and US President Barack Obama, the United States and Pakistan agreed on October 22 to take effective action against all terrorist groups, including Lashkar-e-Taiba. According to a joint statement issued after the meeting, Pakistan also agreed to ensure that all Taliban groups, including the Haqqani Network, "are unable to operate from the soil of Pakistan." The two leaders expressed concern over violence along the Line of Control, and noted their "support for confidence-building measures and effective mechanisms that are acceptable" to both India and Pakistan. President Obama and Prime Minister Sharif discussed "the continuing threat of nuclear terrorism" as well, although there was no mention of a nuclear deal that media in both Pakistan and the United States speculated about. Prime Minister Sharif reiterated Pakistan's firm resolve not to allow any ISIS footprint in Pakistan. The leaders emphasised the importance of a sustained and resilient dialogue process between India and Pakistan, which should aim at resolving all outstanding territorial and other disputes, including Kashmir. President Obama commended Pakistan for hosting and facilitating the first public talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in July 2015 and highlighted the opportunity presented by Pakistan's willingness to facilitate a reconciliation process that would help end insurgent violence in Afghanistan.

Prime Minister Sharif meets the US defence secretary at Pentagon⁶³

Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif visited Pentagon on October 22 at the invitation of US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter and discussed with him bilateral defence ties and the regional security situation. Carter expressed appreciation for the progress achieved by Pakistan in degrading terrorist networks and lauded the government's efforts to achieve a national political consensus on fighting terrorism. The meeting also discussed matters related to regional peace and security.

Indian diplomat summoned by Pakistan Foreign Office⁶⁴

"The Indian Deputy High Commissioner, Mr J.P. Singh, was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to protest over the unprovoked ceasefire violations by India during the nights of October 23, 24 and 25," Foreign Office spokesman Qazi M. Khalilullah said in a statement. The FO statement said it had also informed the Indian diplomat of a "threatening phone call" made from New Delhi on October 23 to the Sindh Governor House in Karachi. "Details of the call were also shared with him," Khalilullah said, adding that India was asked to investigate.

Pakistan submits three dossiers on Indian interference⁶⁵

Three dossiers have been submitted at the office of the Secretary General of the United Nations on Indian interference in Pakistan's internal affairs and support

for terrorism in the country, according to Adviser to Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz. He said at a press conference on October 1 that the dossiers contained documents relating to India's interference and support for terrorism in Balochistan, Fata through TTP and in Karachi. These were handed over to the Secretary General's Chief of Staff Susana Malcorra by Pakistan's Ambassador to UN Maleeha Lodhi. Aziz said each dossier comprises 15-20 pages and discussions on UN action on the documents would take place later. Again on October 21, Pakistan handed over three dossiers to US Secretary of State John Kerry on India's involvement in subversive activities in the country. Adviser on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz gave the dossiers to Kerry as he came to the official US guesthouse to meet Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The US State Department, however, said it could not confirm or deny receiving the dossiers from Pakistan.

Pakistan Foreign Office expresses concern over hike in India's defence budget⁶⁶

The Foreign Office of Pakistan expressed concern over India expanding its conventional military capabilities and warned that its actions could affect the region's strategic balance. "The steep rise in India's defence budget and its massive arms build-up through acquisition of modern weaponry is a matter of concern," Foreign Office Spokesman Qazi Khalilullah said at the weekly briefing. India's current defence budget is \$40.4 billion and it is one of the biggest arms importers in the world. The increasing gap in the military capability compels Pakistan to increase its reliance on nuclear deterrence.

Pakistan's chief of the air staff deliver address at the National Defence University, Washington DC⁶⁷

Chief of the Air Staff Air Chief Marshal Sohail Aman has said that Pakistan wants peace with all countries in the region, including India, and blame game by anyone in this regard does not serve any purpose. Addressing participants of the National Defence Course at the National Defence University, Washington DC, on October 9, he said: "first, we have to understand the regional dynamics and secondly, find out comprehensive strategies to fight the menace of terrorism together."

Chief of Army Staff Gen Raheel Sharif visits Turkey⁶⁸

Chief of Army Staff Gen Raheel Sharif, who arrived in Turkey on October 12 on a three-day official visit, expressed heartfelt condolence over Ankara terrorist blasts. During his interaction with the Turkish Army Chief, Gen. Sharif discussed to enhance bilateral cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism training, counter-IED and intelligence domain. The COAS said Pakistan and Turkey were facing daunting challenges, adding, "I am sure, we will surmount them with a common and coherent approach. We assure you our unflinching support." General Sharif was awarded the Turkish Legend of Merit for his services for regional peace, courageously handling the menace of terrorism besides clarity in direction and sense of purpose in leading the Pakistan Army and fighting barbarian terrorists successfully in an exemplary manner. Chief of Army Staff Gen Raheel Sharif called on Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on October 13. The army chief also held meetings with the Turkish defence minister and chief of general staff and expressed satisfaction on the defence cooperation between the two countries. Both sides vowed to enhance defence collaboration.

Pakistan, Turkey launch negotiations on FTA⁶⁹

Pakistan and Turkey on October 15 started negotiations on a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) covering trade in goods, services and investments. According to a press release issued after the inaugural session held in Turkish capital Ankara, the two sides reiterated their commitment to have a comprehensive FTA and conclude the negotiations on a fast-track basis. The Pakistan delegation was led by Commerce Additional Secretary Robina Athar and the Turkish side was headed by Acting Deputy Undersecretary of the Ministry of Economy Husnu Dilemre. At the conclusion of the session, the two sides signed the terms of reference (TORs) for FTA negotiations. The next round of the negotiations will be held in Islamabad in December. The decision to have an FTA between the two countries was taken by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Turkish counterpart Ahmet Davutoglu in February 2015 during the fourth session of High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSC) held in Islamabad.

Pakistan signs defence agreement with Turkey⁷⁰

Pakistan and Turkey signed on October 28 a defence agreement under which Pakistan will get 34 T-37 aircraft and spares free of cost from its close friend. The T-37 is a Jet Trainer and Light Attack aircraft. The agreement was signed by Director General of Pakistan's Defence Procurement Maj Gen Naveed Ahmed and Turkey's Chief of Logistics Maj Gen Serdar Gulbas. A Joint Communique was also signed by Pakistan's Defence Secretary retired Lt Gen Muhammad Alam Khattak and Turkey's Deputy Chief of General Staff Gen Yasar Guler. During his visit to Turkey, the defence secretary focused on Pakistan's defence and military capability and its requirements in the current global perspective.

Iran's secretary of the Supreme National Security Council visits Pakistan⁷¹

Iran has renewed its proposal for a currency swap arrangement with Pakistan to promote trade. Iran's secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani, who was on a two-day visit to Pakistan, pitched the currency swap proposal again during a meeting with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on October 29. Although security cooperation was high on the agenda of the top Iranian security official's visit, the two sides also deliberated on opportunities for expanding cooperation. During their talks, the two countries agreed to cooperate on Afghanistan, and Pakistan expressed its readiness to accept Iran's mediatory role for revival of the reconciliation process.

Chief of Malaysian Army meets General Raheel Sharif⁷²

Chief of Malaysian Army General Tan Sri Raja Mohamed Affandi Bin Raja Mohamed Noor during a meeting with Chief of Army Staff Gen Raheel Sharif at the General Headquarters on October 5 discussed the current defence cooperation and prospects for expanding it in future. During the meeting, views were exchanged on issues of mutual interest, including defence, training and security cooperation between the two countries, and the overall regional security situation, a military spokesman said.

Deputy defence minister of Czech Republic meets the chief of army staff⁷³

Deputy Defence Minister of Czech Republic Tomas Kuchta called on the Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif, at the General Headquarters on October 6. Matters of mutual interest including defence cooperation came under discussion during the meeting, according to Inter Services Public Relations.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia conclude first joint counter-terrorism exercises⁷⁴

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia concluded on October 30, their first joint counter-terrorism exercises code-named As-Shahab-1. Special services forces of the two countries participated in the 12-day exercises at the National Counter Terrorism Centre, Pabbi, near Jhelum. The training drills included exercises for advanced shooting techniques; fighting in built-up areas; cordon and search operations; and airdropping and heli lifting of troops for operations. The Pakistan Air Force and Army's Aviation wing also took part in the exercises. The Saudi contingent comprised 57 troops. Both sides shared their experiences of conducting counter-terrorism operations. Army Chief Gen Raheel Sharif and Saudi Commander of Special Forces Gen Mufleh Bin Saleem Al-Otaibi attended the concluding ceremony.

China to build four submarines in Karachi⁷⁵

China will build in Karachi four of eight submarines that it is selling to Pakistan. Minister for Defence Production Rana Tanveer Hussain told at the inauguration of the Defence Export Promotion Organisation (DEPO) Display Centre in the federal capital. He further said that construction of the submarines would simultaneously begin in Pakistan and China. China, he said, would transfer the technology to Pakistan for submarine construction. Mr Hussain did not specify when the construction would begin, but said it would be happening soon. A training centre would be set up in Karachi for this purpose. The minister did not either say which type of submarines were being purchased from China. It is, however, speculated that the deal was for Yuan-class Type-041 diesel-electric submarines equipped with AIP systems.

Pakistan opposes creation of permanent seats on expanded UNSC⁷⁶

Pakistan has reaffirmed that it opposes the creation of new permanent seats as it is contrary to the universally agreed principles of democracy, accountability and transparency. Pakistan's UN Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi told the UN General Assembly on the "Question of Equitable Representation in the membership of Security Council" on October 30 that the Council needed to be expanded in the category of elected seats, i.e., the non-permanent seats.

Lt Gen (Retd) Nasser Khan Janjua appointed as the NSA⁷⁷

The government notified on October 22 the appointment of retired Lt Gen Nasser Khan Janjua as the new National Security Adviser (NSA). He has been appointed "with immediate effect, with the status of minister of state," said a notification issued by the Cabinet Division, ending media speculations about the appointment. The post was held by Sartaj Aziz who is also the Adviser on Foreign Affairs and held the status of a federal minister. The new adviser will be based at the prime

minister's secretariat. According to a government source, it had decided to bring in a new NSA to revitalise the national security division.

UN chief condemns attacks on Ashura processions⁷⁸

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has strongly condemned the terrorist attacks on Ashura processions and Imambargahs in Pakistan. In a statement issued by his spokesperson, Ban condemned the recent attacks in Sindh and Balochistan and also offered condolences to the families of victims.

Pakistan denies to take foreign assistance for earthquake relief⁷⁹

Pakistan declared that it did not need any foreign assistance for earthquake victims, but acknowledged the grief and concern expressed by friendly countries. "There is no dearth of resources and we are fully capable of handling the situation on our own," Information Minister Pervaiz Rasheed told a press conference. He was accompanied by National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) Chairman Maj Gen Asghar Nawaz and NDMA spokesperson Ahmad Kamal.

\$326,000 US grant for Chitral projects⁸⁰

The US government announced a grant of \$326,000 to promote agricultural economy and repair drinking water infrastructure in Chitral district hit by flash floods in July. The assistance would come through the US Agency for International Development (USAID). "We are working to restore the provision of food and drinking water, and put people's lives back on track as soon as possible," said USAID Mission Director John Groarke.

Pakistan ranks 138th in the WB's doing business ranking⁸¹

Pakistan dropped two places on the World Bank's (WB) Doing Business ranking for 2016, although its economic indicators were slightly better this year. In 2014, Pakistan was 136 on the business environment list of 189 countries. This year, it slipped two places to 138th.

Sri Lanka

UNHRC adopts consensus resolution on Sri Lanka⁸²

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) at its 30th session in Geneva, through consensus adopted a resolution on Sri Lanka on October 1 on accountability for the alleged human rights violations during war in Sri Lanka. The resolution A/HRC/30/L.29 "Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka" was submitted on September 24 by the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, United Kingdom and the United States and backed by Sri Lanka. The adoption of the resolution follows the presentation of the report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) investigation to the Council by the High Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein on September 30. The resolution calls for the establishment of a Sri Lankan Judicial Mechanism with a Special Counsel to investigate allegations of violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law. The proposed mechanism will include Special Counsels office, of Commonwealth and other foreign judges, defence lawyers, and authorised prosecutors and investigators.

The United States and Britain hailed the adoption of the “historic resolution” on Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council.

Sri Lanka sends a CID team to Maldives⁸³

Sri Lanka sent a team of experts to Male to assist investigations into the explosion of the boat carrying Maldives President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom and First Lady Fathimath Ibrahim on September 28. The Sri Lankan team comprising four detectives of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and forensic experts left for Male on October 1. Acting Foreign Minister Dr. Harsha de Silva during a telephone conversation with the Acting Foreign Minister of Maldives Mohamed Hussain Shareef had expressed Sri Lanka’s concern on the explosion and offered assistance.

Prime minister of Sri Lanka visits Japan⁸⁴

Sri Lanka’s Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe made an official visit to Japan on October 3. During the visit, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe delivered a special lecture at the inaugural ceremony of Japan Science and Technology Association’s annual sessions in Kyoto on October 4 and addressed the Japanese Diet on October 5. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe met Prime Minister Shinzo Abe briefly on the sideline of the conference in Kyoto, where Abe assured his full support and that of his government to Sri Lanka and decided to form a high-level committee to look at strengthening ties in all areas between both countries, including on the economic and political fronts. The prime minister held bilateral discussions with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on October 6. During the bilateral talk Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe agreed that Japan will cooperate in shoring up the Sri Lanka’s economy through infrastructure development and strengthening its maritime surveillance capability. During his stay in Japan, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe met Japanese Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. Wickremesinghe had talks with Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida in Japan on October 5 while on a five day visit to the country. At the meeting, the Japanese foreign minister had noted the efforts of the new government to win the confidence of the international community. Kishida said that as a close friend of Sri Lanka, the Japanese Government will assist Sri Lanka as it looks to create a new country. He said Japan has taken note of the efforts of the new government to create a conducive environment for investors in Sri Lanka. Wickremesinghe noted that Japan was one of five countries which first established diplomatic relations with Sri Lanka. He said that Sri Lanka will extend its full cooperation to ensure Japan obtains a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

Sri Lanka, India navies hold 25th IMBL meeting aboard Indian naval ship⁸⁵

The 25th International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) meeting between the representatives of Navies and Coast Guards of Sri Lanka and India was held onboard Indian Naval Ship Savitri at the Indo-Sri Lanka Maritime Boundary Line off Kankasanthurai on October 7, 2015. The Sri Lankan delegation was headed by the Commander Northern Naval Area, Rear Admiral Piyal De Silva. The Indian delegation was headed by Naval Officer-in-Charge (Tamil Nadu & Puducherry)

Commodore Alok Bhatnagar. Both delegations consisted of officers specialised in diversified fields. The navies of the two countries meet annually aiming at strengthening the naval relationship between the neighbours. The 25th meeting primarily focused on maintaining effective maritime security in the region by integration of forces through co-operation, coordination and collaboration. Mutual understanding of limitations and capabilities of forces to enhance service interoperability and system compatibility in countering challenges in time to come and setting up a viable mechanism for information sharing at tactical level also were important points of discussion at the meeting.

US extends assistance to preserve cultural sites and demining activities⁸⁶

As part of its continuing efforts to preserve Sri Lanka's cultural and religious heritage, the Embassy of the United States of America announced new grants totaling \$300,000 to help restore the ancient Buddhist Rajagala Monastery and improve preservation of artifacts at the Anuradhapura Archeological Museum. Under the new grant, the University of Sri Jayewardenepura will receive \$150,000 from the U.S. Embassy through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) to continue its restoration of the Rajagala Monastery. This is the second phase of U.S. assistance on this project, adding to an initial \$100,000 grant from 2013. A separate \$150,000 grant to Sri Lanka's Department of Archaeology will improve the storage and preservation of artifacts at the Anuradhapura Archeological Museum. The U.S. Embassy previously supported the Museum, one of Sri Lanka's most visited, with grants in 2009 and 2012. Since 2005, the U.S. Embassy through AFCP has funded eleven conservation projects in Sri Lanka, representing a total commitment of over \$730,000. At a meeting on October 8 with D M Swaminathan, U S Ambassador Atul Keshap announced an additional \$1.745 million for demining activities of international and domestic partners and the National Mine Action Committee (NMAC) under the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Resettlement, and Hindu Religious Affairs.

China sends special envoy to mend ties with Lanka⁸⁷

In a significant move, China has dispatched Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Liu Zhenmin as the first special envoy to Sri Lanka since the parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka in August. His visit came on the heels of back-to-back trips by the Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, to India and Japan, the South China Morning Post reported. "The purpose of the special envoy's trip is to congratulate the prime minister and probably invite him to undertake a China trip, now that he has visited Japan and India," a Sri Lankan official said.

Sri Lanka Army releases over 600 acres in North to rightful owners⁸⁸

Sri Lanka Army, in keeping with the new government's policy to release more security forces-held lands to the civilians, has released over 600 acres. The Army said it had formally released 613 acres of land held by armed forces for security requirements during the war in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu Districts to the original owners of the land and for resettlement of displaced civilians. At the National Sowing and Cultivation ceremony held at Waddakachchi in Kilinochchi on October 5, President Maithripala Sirisena handed over the deeds to the lands to the owners.

Out of the 613 acres, 474 acres belong to Kilinochchi District and 139 acres belong to Mullaitivu District. The lands were being used earlier by tri-services under the Security Force Headquarters - Kilinochchi (SFHQ-KLN) and Security Force Headquarters - Mullaitivu (SFHQ-MLT) for security purposes as the fight against terrorism was intensifying before May 2009.

73 Sri Lankan refugees return home⁸⁹

Another batch of Sri Lankan refugees in India returned back to Sri Lanka with the assistance of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The 73 refugees left the special camps for Sri Lanka to start a new life on the island.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe visits Singapore⁹⁰

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe made a two days official visit to Singapore on October 15, 2015. On October 16 Prime Minister Wickremesinghe met his Singaporean counterpart Lee Hsien Loong and discussed further means of promoting bilateral cooperation between the two countries. During his visit, the Prime Minister also met with several key Ministers of Singapore, including Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Economic and Social Policies, K. Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Law, Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Foreign Affairs, S. Iswaran, Minister for Trade and Industry and Heng Swee Keat, Minister for Finance. The purpose of prime minister's visit was to obtain support and funding from Singapore for the proposed development program to be implemented in Sri Lanka. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe was accompanied by Minister of Development Strategies and International Trade Malik Samarawickrema, Secretary to the Prime Minister Saman Ekanayake, Governor of the Central Bank Arjuna Mahendran, High Commissioner-Designate of Sri Lanka to Singapore Nimal Weeraratne, and Acting High Commissioner Wishwanath Aponso.

Finance minister participates in the annual meeting of the WB and the IMF⁹¹

Sri Lanka's Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake participated in the Annual Meeting of the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) from October 9 to 11 in Lima, Peru. In the meeting, the two international lenders have agreed to extend unconditional support for Sri Lanka's development initiatives. On the sidelines of the meeting, the finance minister had discussions with World Bank's Senior Vice President (Operations), Kyle Peters and World Bank Vice President for South Asia Region Annette Dixon on financing future development programs for Sri Lanka. At this occasion, Minister Ravi Karunanayake has been appointed as the Chairman of the Intergovernmental Group of 24 countries on International Monetary Affairs, which is scheduled to take place in Bali Nusa Dua, Indonesia, in October 2018.

Chinese military delegation makes goodwill visit to Sri Lanka⁹²

The Commander of the Chengdu Military of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) China, General Li Zuocheng, accompanied by five more senior officers, was in Sri Lanka on a goodwill visit with the aim of learning and sharing experiences of both the Sri Lanka Army and the PLA. The delegation, minutes after paying a courtesy

call on the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), Air Chief Marshal Kolitha Gunatilleke at the Office of the CDS on October 13, arrived at the Army Headquarters to be received by Chief of Staff, Major General Jagath Dias, flanked by Principal Staff Officers. General Li Zuocheng and Lieutenant General Crishanthe De Silva, Commander of the Army during the cordial meeting at the latter's office exchanged views on matters of mutual interest in relation to security operations, generally confined to the rural hinterland and other spheres of military training conducted in specific areas in China. Major General Mahesh Senanayake, Military Secretary and Major General P.M.R Bandara, Senior Liaison Officer were also associated with the meeting, the army media unit said.

Australian delegation meets defence secretary of Sri Lanka⁹³

Australian delegation led by the Deputy High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Tim Huggins, had talks with Defence Secretary Karunasena Hettiarachchi at the ministry premises on October 14. The Defence Ministry said that a cordial discussion was held between the Secretary and Deputy High Commissioner on matters of bilateral relevance and mutual interest.

Sri Lanka Navy holds special naval exercise on searching drugs in sea vessels⁹⁴

Sri Lanka Navy held a special naval exercise on searching for drugs in the sea on October 15 for the participants of the Meeting of the Senior Drug Enforcement Officials of the Indian Ocean Region in Colombo. A delegation of 60 officials representing 21 countries participated in the occasion which comprised a practical experience on checking fishing vessels by Sri Lanka navy VBSS (Visit, Board, Search and Seize) teams. The delegates viewed a simulated exercise of a mid-sea boarding by the Sri Lanka Navy boarding teams, and vessel search techniques to identify concealed compartments to detect narcotics in fishing vessels. This exercise was jointly conducted with the expertise of the Sri Lanka Navy and the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) at the Colombo Naval Base. The three-day meeting of Senior Drug Enforcement Officials of the Indian Ocean Region commenced on October 13, under the patronage of President Maithripala Sirisena.

Religious tensions eased in Sri Lanka after new government – US⁹⁵

The United States says religious tensions have eased in Sri Lanka after the new government took office and staked out a much more tolerant view. Speaking at the release of the 2014 Report on International Religious Freedom on October 14, David Saperstein, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom at the US State Department said the new government has staked out a more tolerant view. The 2014 Report on International Religious Freedom said the Sri Lankan authorities tacitly condoned harassment and violence, particularly by Buddhist nationalist groups, against religious minorities last year.

Sri Lanka asks China to adjust terms of loans to help overcome financial crisis⁹⁶

Sri Lanka says the country is facing one of the worst financial crisis ever since a big part of the island nation's revenue is spent on servicing the excessive Chinese loans with high interest rates borrowed by the previous regime of Mahinda Rajapaksa. "Chinese loans are a big part of our problem. A bulk of the government

expenditure goes into servicing them," Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake told *the South China Morning Post* (SCMP) in an exclusive interview. The Minister urged China to put their disputes behind them and help the country through one of its worst financial crises ever by adjusting the rates of the loans.

Sri Lanka to allow Chinese submarines to visit, will keep India informed: PM⁹⁷

Sri Lanka will allow future submarine visits by China provided they are not too frequent, and will keep the neighboring India informed of the visits, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said in an interview with *The Straits Times*. The Sri Lankan Prime Minister said that the problem with the last visit by a Chinese submarine was that India claims it was not informed.

UN assistant secretary-general meets Sri Lankan foreign minister⁹⁸

The United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Miroslav Jenca visited Sri Lanka from 21-25 October. During the visit, Jenca called on the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mangala Samaraweera on October 21. His five-day visit follows recent discussions between the Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and President Maithripala Sirisena in New York in September.

Human right delegation to Sri Lanka discusses right violations with defence secretary⁹⁹

A delegation of Human Rights Watch (HRW) to Sri Lanka led by Asia Executive Director Brad Adams, met with the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence Karunasena Hettiarachchi at the Ministry premises on October 22. The HRW representatives exchanged views with the Secretary on issues related to the follow-up of the resolution adopted in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on Reconciliation and Accountability process in Sri Lanka, the Ministry of Defence said in a statement. Discussions were also held on activities of HRW including training programs conducted in relation to International Humanitarian Laws and International Human Rights Laws and avenues for future cooperation.

Sri Lanka submits its Climate Action Plan ahead of 2015 Paris Agreement¹⁰⁰

Sri Lanka has submitted its new climate action plan to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment in Sri Lanka as the National Focal Point to the UNFCCC has submitted its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) in accordance with the decisions taken at the Conference of Parties of the UNFCCC. This INDC comes in advance of a new universal climate change agreement which will be reached at the UN climate conference in Paris, in December this year.

Bangladesh Navy ship arrives at Sri Lankan port on goodwill visit¹⁰¹

The Bangladesh naval ship "Abu Bakr" arrived at the Port of Colombo on October 20, 2015 on a four-day goodwill visit.

US Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues visits Sri Lanka¹⁰²

The United States Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Catherine Russell and Sri Lanka's Foreign Affairs Minister Mangala Samaraweera have discussed strategies to advance economic empowerment of women on October 28. The senior U.S official was on a visit to Sri Lanka from October 27 -29, 2015. Ambassador Russell also held talks with Minister of Women and Children's Affairs Chandrani Bandara.

Sri Lanka joins the open government partnership¹⁰³

Sri Lanka has become the newest member of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a multilateral initiative that aims to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance. Sri Lanka endorsed the Open Government Declaration committing "to foster a global culture of open government that empowers and delivers for citizens, and advances the ideals of open and participatory 21st century government," at the Open Government Partnership's Global Summit that is held in Mexico City from October 27 - 29. Sri Lanka is the only South Asian participating country in the OGP and joins other countries in the Asian region such as Indonesia, Mongolia, Philippines and Republic of Korea.

Sri Lanka signs loan agreements with Saudi Fund¹⁰⁴

The Government of Sri Lanka has signed two new loan agreements with Saudi Fund for Development (SFD) to obtain financing for two major projects. The SFD will partly finance the rehabilitation of A5 Road corridor from Badulla to Chenkaladi and provide funding to procure medical equipment for the ongoing Epilepsy Hospital Project, the Finance Ministry said. Both Loan Agreements have been signed on October 30 in Colombo by Secretary to the Treasury and Secretary to the Ministry of Finance Dr. R.H.S. Samarasinghe, and Vice Chairman and Managing Director of SFD Youssef AL-Bassam. The A5 is one of the major highways linking parts of the Central Province to Eastern Province geopolitical zones of the country which carries the bulk of the traffic between Batticaloa and Peradeniya via Badulla. The project, at a total estimated cost of US\$ 140 million, is jointly financed by SFD and OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID). Under the Financing Agreement, SFD will provide US\$ 60 million for the project.

Peaceful protest in Sri Lanka urges UN to implement its resolutions on Kashmir¹⁰⁵

The Kashmir Study Forum and Pakistani community in Sri Lanka with support of Sri Lankan friends organised a peaceful protest on October 27, opposite the United Nation Office in Colombo to mark the Kashmir Black Day. The protesters urged the Secretary General of the United Nations to encourage, facilitate and support efforts leading to a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolutions, as well as exercise the mandate entrusted to him by Charter of the United Nations and under relevant international instruments to forthwith ensure the fundamental rights and freedoms of the oppressed Kashmiri people in particular their right to self-determination. Similar peaceful assemblies

were also held in other parts of the Island including Ampara, Batticaloa and Puttalam, the Pakistan High Commission in Colombo said in a statement.

Business environment improves in Sri Lanka in 2016 despite drop in ranking¹⁰⁶

Despite a decline of eight places in the World Bank's "Doing Business 2016" index, which measures the ease of doing business in 189 different countries, the overall business environment improved in Sri Lanka, the Doing Business report released by the World Bank revealed.

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