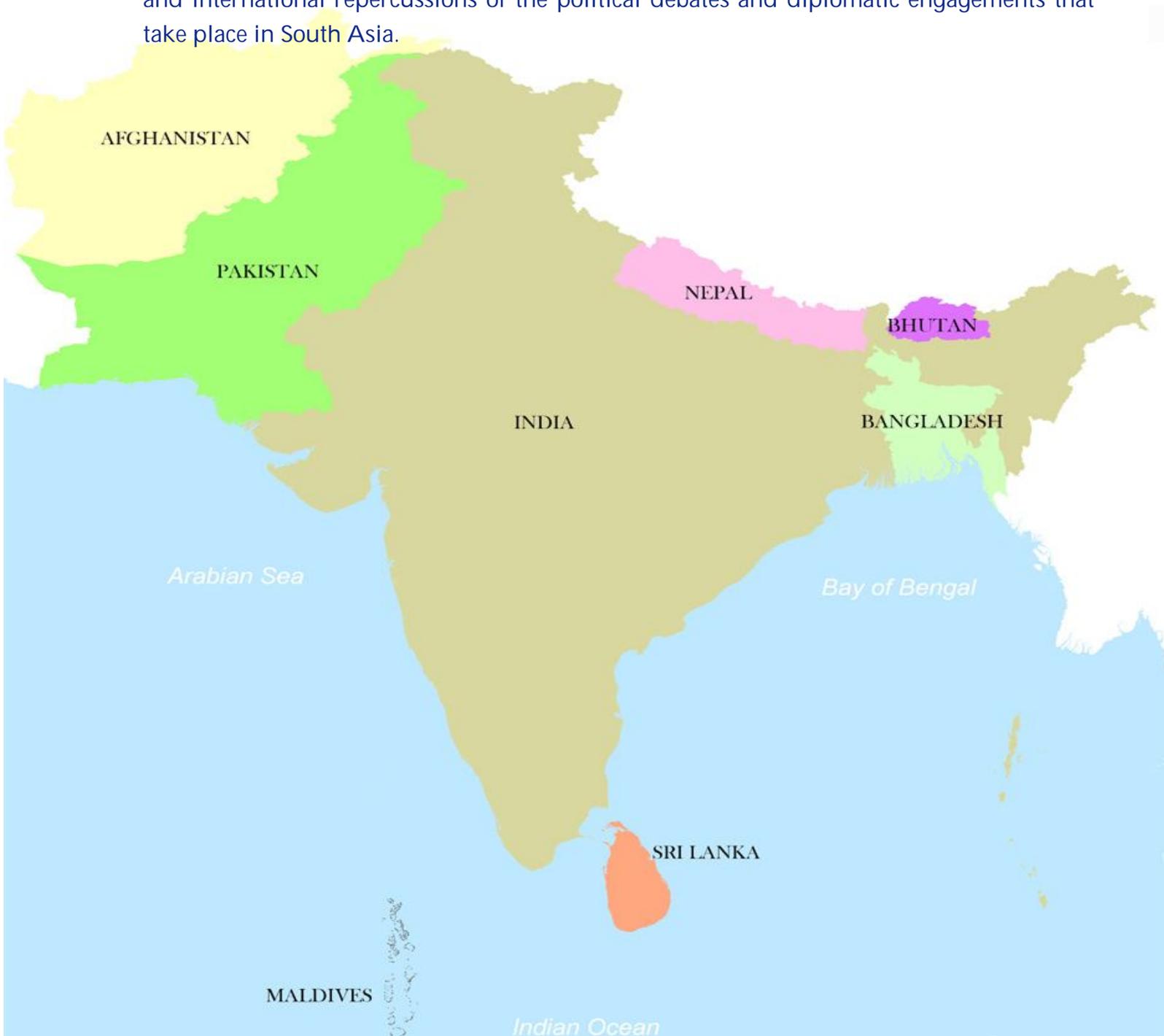


SOUTH ASIA TRENDS

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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.



Compiled & Edited by
Gulbin Sultana

idsa
INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE
STUDIES & ANALYSES
रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

Editor's Note

Sri Lanka's new president Maithripala Sirisena paid his first official foreign trip to India on February 15. Though no major agreements were signed or any significant announcement were made on the contentious issues between the two countries, the visit paved the way for better relations between India and Sri Lanka.

In a bid to enhance ties with the neighbours, Afghan President Ghani directed the foreign ministry to work hard to promote ties with the country's immediate neighbours. Since the US drawdown, Pakistan has extended its cooperation to Afghanistan to bring peace in the region.

Nevertheless, Pakistan premier reiterated that only a fair resolution of the "dispute" in Kashmir would ensure lasting peace in the region, but blamed India for its non-compliance of all the resolutions passed by UN regarding Kashmir.

Free and fair judicial system of Maldives was questioned following the arrest order of the former President Mohamed Nasheed who was charged with terrorism. Allegedly, Nasheed was denied the right to legal representation at the court hearing. International community noted with concerns increasingly politicisation of the Maldivian judiciary. The executive order to arrest the former President resulted in a major political tension in the small island.

There was also no sign of progress in the ongoing political stalemates in Bangladesh and Nepal. In a move to strengthen sub-regional cooperation in areas of hydropower, transit and connectivity, Bhutan, Nepal, India and Bangladesh opted for a quadrilateral meet for the first time. Although the meeting reached no concrete decision, the forum is expected to facilitate and ensure cooperation and economic development in the sub-region.

Afghanistan

Taliban finalises peace negotiators¹

After showing a green signal for peace talks, the Taliban have likely selected their seven representatives residing in Qatar to attend peace negotiations with the Afghan government, according to a former Taliban leader. According to the former leader of Taliban's Jaish-ul-Muslimeen wing, Syed Akbar Agha, five recently released Gitmo prisoners would also possibly join the group of Taliban negotiators. Syed Tayyab Agha and Mawlawi Shahabuddin Dilawar, who were the chief justice and the ambassador to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in the Taliban regime, and also Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai and Qari Din Mohammad, are among the negotiators representing the Taliban. Reports indicate that the national security advisor, Mohammad Hanif Atmar, who visited Qatar aimed at paving grounds for peace talks, met the country's premier, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Nasser Bin Khalifa Al-Thani. However, the main purpose of Atmar's visit was said to hold meeting with the five members of the Taliban who were released from Guantanamo Bay Jail. These statements are expressed as President Ashraf Ghani has accelerated peace efforts these days by consulting different groups of the society including the High Peace Council (HPC) members. Following apparent progress regarding peace talks, Ghani had held a telephonic conversation with Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, informing him about the advancements made in this regard. Welcoming Islamabad's role in bringing Taliban to the peace negotiation table, Ghani hoped the process would begin in near future. In respect to boosted efforts of Afghanistan for achieving peace, the United States has welcomed the efforts of Afghan government for putting an end to the conflict. Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dr. Abdullah Abdullah also hinted at early beginning of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban leadership, but said national interests would be kept supreme. Meanwhile, Sartaj Aziz, Advisor on National Security and Foreign Affairs to Pakistan's Prime Minister, said Beijing had offered to host peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The final decision, however, would be made by the Afghan government.

Pakistan's army and ISI chiefs visit Kabul²

Pakistan's Army Chief General Raheel Sharif and the Director General of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Rizwan Akhtar, went to Kabul on February 17 on one-day visit to discuss security issues between the two countries. In his meeting with CEO Abdullah Abdullah, Sharif stressed the need for a joint combat against terrorism and improving ties between the countries. Appreciating Pakistan's recent cooperation with Afghanistan, Abdullah said that insurgency was a common challenge for both countries, calling the joint cooperation vital for both nations.

Police chiefs gather to discuss spring fighting³

As the spring fighting season nears, police chiefs from all over the country gathered in Kabul to attend a three-day key security seminar aimed at examining and discussing key security issues including the possible threats in the coming season, which usually begins in April or May. The opening day of the seminar was attended by high-profile officials and dignitaries including CEO Abdullah Abdullah, the Interior Minister Noor-ul-Haq Ulumi and his senior Deputy Gen. Mohammad Ayoub Salangi, the acting Defense Minister Enayatullah Nazari, the National

Directorate of Security (NDS) Chief Rahmatullah Nabil and the Commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan Gen. John F. Campbell. Stressing the need for public support for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), Abdullah urged the seminar attendees to consider the facts shared in this important meeting.

Values of jihad will never be violated: Abdullah⁴

The first Ministers Council of the new cabinet was held on February 16 where Chief Executive of the National Unity Government Abdullah Abdullah emphasised that the values of jihad will not be undermined by personal motives. Abdullah said that the status of the mujahideen who served the country is preserved and no one will forget the sacrifices they made for the future of the country. "Jihad values are the everlasting values of the people of Afghanistan, which were gained by rendering heavy sacrifices," he said. "This would not be violated under any circumstance, including egoism." His comments came a day after Abdul Rab Rassoul Sayyaf's speech at a ceremony marking the 26th anniversary of the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Sayyaf strongly criticised the NUG over what he believed was the isolation of mujahideen from political talks and negotiations, exclaiming that "they were mujahideen who defended the country."

Ghani stresses enhanced ties with neighbouring states⁵

Stressing enhanced ties with neighboring countries, including India, President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani on February 15 expressed optimism that relations with neighbouring states were navigating toward positive direction. A statement from the Presidential Palace said that Ghani held video calls with Afghanistan's ambassadors in Iran, Pakistan, China, India, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani and the ministry's political advisor Hikmat Karzai were present on the occasion. During the course of his talks, the president said that time was ripped for broadening ties with neighboring countries. He directed the foreign minister and Afghan ambassadors to work hard to promote ties with the immediate neighbors. In addition, the president directed foreign minister to work out a mechanism to finalise agreements inked with the neighbouring countries. He directed the officials concerned to portray true image of Afghanistan.

India refuses to invest more in infrastructure project⁶

India has refused to invest more in a trilateral transport infrastructure project with Iran and Afghanistan catering for the transportation of Afghan mineral goods by the Iranian port Chabahar. The Indian Express quoted government sources as saying that India has rejected an Iranian demand to increase investment on the project during a visit by Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval to Teheran. New Delhi is worried that situation in Afghanistan is unfavourable for continuing the project after the pullout of U.S.- led NATO troops taking into account a sharp escalation in fighting across Afghanistan, said the report. India also fears a US \$ 10 billion project being invested by India in an iron-ore and steel project in Hajigak of Afghanistan would be scuttled. Relations with Kabul has seen renewed strains following a dropping of requests by the Afghan government for Indian arms. India considers this as an apparent effort by Kabul to soothe the feeling of Pakistan, said the newspaper.

Ghani attends Munich security conference⁷

President Ashraf Ghani went to Germany to attend the 51st round of the Munich Security Conference. In his three-day official trip, Ghani was accompanied by National Security Adviser Mohammad Hanif Atmar and the newly-appointed Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani. During the second day of talks at the Munich Security Conference, President Ashraf Ghani implored European and other world leaders to remain vigilant and engaged in the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan, even while new crises emerge in Arab nations.

Obama proposes \$1 billion additional support for Afghanistan⁸

US President Barack Obama proposed \$1 billion in economic support fund for a reform-driven government in Kabul. This is in addition to more than \$3 billion for the Afghan national security forces.

UN observes rise in civilian casualties in 2014⁹

At least 3,700 Afghan civilians, including women and children, were either killed or wounded as a result of the ongoing conflict in the country in 2014, the United Nations said in its annual report released on February 19, 2015. The UN report attributed the rise in casualties to intensified ground fighting, in which weapons like mortars, rockets and grenades are used in populated areas, sometimes indiscriminately. The United Nations also said that Taliban's involvement in criminal activity appears to have increased in Afghanistan, warning the trend has consequences for peace and security in the war-shattered country. A new study conducted by a U.N. Security Council Committee indicates the scale and depth of this criminal activity is new, and builds on decades of interaction between the Taliban and others involved in criminal behaviour, including narcotics trafficking, illicit mining, collusion with mafias and kidnapping for ransom. The Taliban has so far not commented on the report.

Women under-represented in unity govt: Watchdog¹⁰

The Transparent Election Foundation of Afghanistan (TEFA) criticised the Afghan government for giving women fewer representation in its structure. More than seven million people, including 38 percent women, exercised their right to enfranchise in the April 5, 2014 elections. The unity government has promised giving women four seats on the new cabinet. The government introduced 24 ministers-designate, including three females, but none of the women were able to win a vote of confidence from the parliament.

Bangladesh

UN expresses concerns about violence in Bangladesh¹¹

The United Nations is very much concerned about the violence and loss of lives in Bangladesh. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon is personally committed to the stability and positive development of Bangladesh, his spokesman Stéphane Dujarric said at a press briefing in New York on February 11. Referring to UN moves to mediate and solve the problems in Bangladesh, he said Assistant Secretary General Oscar Fernández-Taranco has been tasked by the secretary general to liaise with the government and he's doing just that.

The AL and the BNP write to UN Secretary General¹²

Both the ruling Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have replied to the letter of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon calling for a dialogue to resolve the current political crisis and an end to violence. BNP insiders said the party in its letter said it was ready to sit for a dialogue with the government to resolve the current political impasse. The letter also mentioned the government's "repression" on the party leaders and workers. The AL sources said the foreign ministry in its letter to the UN chief termed BNP-Jamaat's activities "acts of terrorism" and said the government cannot sit with "terrorists".

British high commissioner meets Khaleda Zia¹³

British High Commissioner Robert W. Gibson has urged all parties to consider confidence building measures that can defuse the current tension in Bangladesh and allow normal life to resume. Gibson made the call after meeting Khaleda Zia at her Gulshan office on February 11. It was the first ever meeting of any foreign envoy stationed in Dhaka with the BNP chief since January 3. Besides, the meeting took place at a time when law enforcers were not allowing any leaders and activists of the BNP-led 20-party alliance to meet Khaleda since February 1. Gibson said his country was committed to the future stability, development and prosperity of Bangladesh in which they were and would remain close partners.

US ambassador to Dhaka meets Prime Minister Hasina¹⁴

The United States assured the government of helping Bangladesh protect and continue with the democratic process in the country. Newly appointed US Ambassador to Dhaka Marcia Stephens Bloom Bernicat made the assurance during her first call on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the latter's Jatiya Sangsad office on February 15.

Delegation from the European parliament's subcommittee on human rights meets Zia¹⁵

The six member delegation of the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights led by vice-chair of the subcommittee Christian Dan Preda, met with Bangladesh Nationalist Party Party (BNP) Chairperson Khaleda Zia at her Gulshan office on February 17. The BNP told the visiting delegation that it was ready for dialogue with the government to bring an end to the ongoing political crisis. The party also said all the subversive activities during the crisis are being carried out by the government and it is doing so only to malign "the opposition's justified movement".

High commissioner of Canada expresses concerns over violence in Bangladesh¹⁶

Canada has called for efforts to end the violence spewing from the ongoing political crisis as it has been costing lives and hurting businesses. "We are seeing the terrible impact of this violence on the Bangladeshi people and the country. This is truly unacceptable," Benoit Pierre Laramée, High Commissioner of Canada, told reporters on February 15, while speaking on the concluding day of Showcase Canada, a trade show, at Sonargaon Hotel. The Showcase Canada 2015 began in

Dhaka on February 14, aiming to boost trade and investment between Bangladesh and Canada. Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed inaugurated the two-day event, organised by Canada Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CanCham) in association with the High Commission of Canada.

Killing of blogger condemned¹⁷

The founder of Mukto-Mona (Free-mind) blog site, Avijit Roy's killing on February 26 in the TSC area of Dhaka University triggered strong condemnations from his fellow writers and publishers at home and abroad. Different political, social and cultural organisations including the ruling Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) strongly condemned the heinous killing and demanded bringing the perpetrators to the book. The United Nations and the USA have strongly condemned the killing and expressed the hope that the perpetrators would be quickly brought to justice through a transparent process of law. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has also condemned the killing saying the attack on Avijit was part of a deadly cycle of violence as a culture of impunity, following such incidents, prevails in Bangladesh. The US was ready to assist the investigation into the brutal killing, if sought, said US Department of State Spokesperson Jen Psaki in a statement issued on February 27.

The CHT International Commission expresses concern over the ban on meeting with the Adivasis¹⁸

The Chittagong Hill Tracts International Commission has expressed grave concern over the home ministry order banning any unsupervised meeting or talking with the Adivasis and restricting foreigners' access to the hill districts. Terming it unconstitutional, discriminatory and contradictory to the CHT Peace Accord, the commission demanded an immediate cancellation of the ministry order. Based on the decisions taken at a home ministry meeting on January 7, the fourth and fifth directives of the 11-point order state if anyone with a foreign passport wants to visit Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban, she/he will have to submit an application to the home ministry at least a month before the intended visit. Besides, any interaction between the adivasis and local or foreign individual or organisation has to be supervised by members of the armed forces and local administration. The commission also slammed the ninth directive stipulating that BGB sector/battalion/border outposts (BOP) can operate on acquired land.

The joint group of customs held its 10th meeting in New Delhi¹⁹

Dhaka and New Delhi on February 5, 2015 agreed to improve infrastructure and install testing and warehouse services in all the 16 land ports along the borders of the two countries. The Joint Group of Customs took the decision to bolster bilateral trade, during its 10th meeting held in New Delhi. Both the countries also agreed to share intelligence information to prevent smuggling of goods and narcotics/psychotropic drugs, and to initiate measures to minimise administrative complexities and operational barriers for quicker clearance of goods through the land ports.

Home secretary-level meeting between India and Bangladesh²⁰

India is understood to have assured Bangladesh that fugitives wanted in the neighbouring country would be deported to it as early as possible. The assurance came at a home secretary-level meeting between the two countries on February 17. Bangladesh has been pressing India to trace and hand over wanted persons including two killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman — Risaldar Mosleuddin and Captain Majed — and a number of other criminals. Dhaka has also been asking New Delhi to hand over wanted Bangladeshi criminals Subrata Bain and Sajjad Hossain who were arrested in 2012. Both have been handed down death sentence in Bangladesh for murder and grenade attack on an Awami League rally in Dhaka.

Mamata Banerjee visits Bangladesh²¹

Mamata Banerjee, West Bengal Chief Minister, went to Bangladesh on a three-day visit. She was invited by Bangladesh Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali on the occasion of "Bhasa Divas" on February 21, pitched for stronger trade and cultural linkages between Bangladesh and West Bengal. This was her first visit to Bangladesh since taking office in 2011. Ahead of her arrival, Mamata Banerjee has expressed hope to reporters in Kolkata that her visit to Bangladesh would further strengthen ties between Bangladesh and her state and promote business between the two sides. During her three-day visit to Bangladesh, Mamata met President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and discussed the Teesta water-sharing deal and the land boundary agreement, among other issues. The chief minister headed a 39-member delegation to Bangladesh.

The land ministry of Bangladesh signs an agreement with an Indian IT firm²²

The land ministry of Bangladesh signed an agreement with an Indian IT firm for implementation of Digital Land Management System (DLMS) in seven districts in the country on February 2. The agreement was signed under the Asian Development Bank funded project "Strengthening Governance Management Project", which began in 2011 and was to be finished this year.

Pakistani diplomat expelled from Dhaka²³

In a fresh diplomatic row between Pakistan and Bangladesh, a Pakistani High Commission official based in Dhaka was declared persona non grata by the Bangladeshi government and was asked to leave the country. Diplomatic official Mazhar Khan was charged by Bangladesh's foreign ministry of running an illegal Indian currency business in Dhaka beside alleged links with militants. Pakistan's Foreign Office Spokesperson Tasneem Aslam also confirmed the incident and said the official has reached Islamabad. "Allegations against him are baseless and the incident is unfortunate," she told the Pakistani media. The Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka sent Mazhar Khan immediately home after getting orders from Bangladesh's ministry of foreign affairs.

Dhaka denies the entry of a North Korean ship to Chittagong Port²⁴

Dhaka denied the entry of a North Korean ship to Chittagong Port as the UN Security Council had imposed embargo on the ship's owning company for carrying

prohibited arms over a year ago. The Panama flag-carrying cargo vessel MV ZHONG DE1, IMO No. 8715493, was owned by Ocean Maritime Management Company Ltd. (OMM) of North Korea. The UN Security Council included the OMM on its sanctions list on July 28, 2014 as it played a key role in arranging the shipment of concealed cargo of arms and related materials from Cuba to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in July 2013. Dhaka as a member of the UN has decided not to allow the DPRK cargo vessel to enter its territory although the ship was carrying cement clinkers from Vietnam.

Bangladesh Navy seized around 14 lakh yaba tablets²⁵

Bangladesh Navy seized around 14 lakh yaba tablets at the outer anchorage of Chittagong port on February 5. A team of the navy's anti-smuggling cell in a drive found the pills worth around Tk 77 crore inside a fishing trawler. In another incident, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) members seized around 70,000 yaba pills from the Naf river at Leda in Teknaf. According to Lt. Co. Abu Zar AL Jahid, commanding officer of 42 BGB Battalion, the tablets worth around 2.10 crore were recovered from a boat.

Bangladesh receives \$1.23 billion in remittance in January 2015²⁶

Bangladesh received \$1.23 billion in remittance in January 2015, down 2.05 percent year-on-year. The figure too is lower than the amount received in December last year, when \$1.27 billion was remitted by migrant workers, according to data from Bangladesh Bank. In the first seven months of the fiscal year, the country received \$8.03 billion in remittance, which is a year-on-year increase of 8.56 percent.

Plan for seamless transit between Bangladesh, India, Bhutan and Nepal²⁷

Bangladesh, India, Bhutan and Nepal, have drawn up a draft plan for seamless transit of passenger, cargo and personal vehicles between the countries. The agreement will allow vehicles to ply designated routes in the four countries and reduce cost and time of unloading and loading of people and goods at the borders, making cross-border trade more efficient. This sub-regional move is an initiative parallel to the proposed SAARC Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) and expected to be open also to other neighbouring countries. Reportedly, India, Bhutan and Nepal have accepted a Bangladesh recommendation to keep the membership of this sub-regional group open so that neighbouring countries like Myanmar and China can connect to the region.

Bhutan

Dagachhu hydropower project commissioned²⁸

The 126 megawatt (MW) Dagachhu hydroelectric project was commissioned on February 21. With this the commercial flow of energy from the Dagachhu project to India began. A total generation of 14.3MW was recorded. However, the commissioning involves only the project's first 63MW unit currently. The Dagachhu project is the first to be managed by a Bhutanese team with a review consultant from Austria. It is also the first public-private hydropower partnership. DGPC holds 59 percent equity, India's Tata Power Company Ltd. holds 26 percent and the National Pension and Provident Fund (NPPF) the remaining 15 percent. The Dagachhu project has a 25-year sales agreement with Tata Power trading company

to supply it with 500,000MW hours of power annually. This is expected to generate Nu 15 billion or over US\$ 250 million in income in the next 25 years for the government. Besides royalty energy, all the project's power will be exported to India. The Dagachhu project was also registered as the world's first cross-border project to receive carbon credits under the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism, as per information on the Asian Development Bank (ADB) website. The ADB provided US\$ 119 million loans, the Raiffeisen Bank, Austria provided Euro 41.2 million, and the NPPF Nu 600 million, to build the Nu 12.2 billion project.

Foreseeing sub-regional economic cooperation²⁹

Bhutan, Nepal, India and Bangladesh opted for a quadrilateral meet for the first time on January 30 to discuss areas of cooperation in water resources including hydropower, transit and connectivity. Although the meeting reached no concrete decision, the director general of department of hydropower and power systems, Dasho Yeshi Wangdi, said it was a good forum to discuss various areas of cooperation to ensure economic development in the sub-region. During the meeting, possibility of undertaking future hydropower projects in hydro-rich countries like Bhutan and Nepal involving at least three countries on an equitable basis was also discussed. Currently, most hydropower projects in the country are government of India funded or public sector undertakings as such as inter governmental, joint venture and public private partnership. For the ongoing projects, he made it clear that there is no scope for other countries because agreements have already been signed which mandates Bhutan to export surplus power to India. However, in future projects, it is up to the government to decide and approve. Bhutan shared its experiences on integrated river basin management and flood forecasting system with India. Bangladesh, he said was also interested in replicating such system and data sharing methods because it is also a downstream country. Regarding the transit and connectivity, ideas on bus and cargo route between the four countries were also floated.

INR reserve at 20 billion³⁰

The country's rupee reserve has increased by Rs 4.5 billion between October and November in 2014, taking the total INR reserve to Rs 20.27 billion. This was the highest INR reserve with the country since 2009, according to the central bank's monthly statistical bulletin. The reserve increased mostly because of hydropower funds, composed of grants and loans that came in from India for the ongoing projects.

India commits funds to build fire fighting capabilities³¹

The Indian government has funded the construction of family and officer quarters for police personnel at a cost of Nu 76.4 million. Under the Project Tied Assistance project for infrastructure development, the Indian government's support will see the construction of 24 units of family quarters and two units of officer quarters at the Changzamtog fire station. This will cost Nu 33.6 million. A four-unit family quarter at the Mothithang fire out post and the construction of fire stations in Paro, Punakha, and Trongsa are also covered under the project.

Joint legal sector programme launched³²

The Austrian and Swiss governments committed Nu 149.6 million for the judiciary sector to support access to justice in Bhutan, with the launching of the joint legal sector programme (LSP) on February 12 at Tashichhodzong. Two new district courts will be constructed in Punakha and Wangduephodrang under the LSP. The construction cost is estimated at Nu 46.3 million and Nu 46.2 million respectively. Besides, 10 students will be provided scholarship to study law in renowned universities of Austria and Switzerland, while three future faculty members of the Royal Institute of Law (RIL) would get the opportunity to pursue studies overseas. The Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) will manage the LSP. The implementing partners are the Supreme Court of Bhutan, Federal Administrative Court of Switzerland (FAC), Bhutan National Legal Institute (BNLI) and RIL.

Prime minister meets Ambassador of Kazakhstan to India³³

Lyonchhoen Tshering Tobgay met the Ambassador of the Republic of Kazakhstan to India, Bulat Sarsenbayev, on February 10 in Thimphu. Lyonchhoen and Ambassador Sarsenbayev discussed exploring tourism opportunities through people-to-people contact, promoting student exchange programmes and combating climate change. The Prime Minister also proposed acquiring Kazakhstan's assistance in building cycling trails around Thimphu, which could be used for commuting as well as for sporting activities.

Tobgay meets the President of the Republic of Iceland³⁴

Lyonchhoen Tshering Tobgay met the President of the Republic of Iceland Dr. Olafur Ragnar Grimsson on February 4 in Thimphu. During the meeting, Lyonchhoen and the President discussed on expediting cooperation on healthy tourism, preservation of glaciers, geothermal energy and greenhouse agriculture among others.

Think globally and act regionally to stand up to climate change: PM³⁵

If at all climate change is to be fought, the entire Himalayan region needs to come together and work together for a common goal. Only then can the rising temperature and melting or retreating glaciers be controlled. Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay said this at the Himalayan Third Pole Circle Meeting in Thimphu on February 5, 2015. In his keynote address, the Lyonchhoen said, regardless of what various studies predict, the fact was that, in Bhutan, glaciers are retreating. They are retreating so quickly that it required to claw ways through rocky moraine, to lower the glacial lakes, to prevent them from breaching dams and flooding, he said, referring to the operation Thorthormi. Spelling out 10 reasons that made Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) region special, which needed protection, Lyonchhoen said it was the attic of the world, with simply "spectacular" landscape, virgin peaks, biodiversity hotspots, fresh water and energy, among others. Lyonchhoen, however, said people in the mountains are faced with various challenges of increasing population, poverty and climate change. Yesterday's meeting was an important stage in the evolution of cooperation and could, through dialogues,

Maldives

lead to the formulation of an informal roadmap, outlining further progress, involving consultation with authorities, institutions and officials in the relevant countries. Experts from 13 countries, including the United States of America, China, Germany, Iceland, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Switzerland, attended the meeting. National Environment Commission organised the meeting in collaboration with ICIMOD.

Former President Mohamed Nasheed arrested on terrorism charges³⁶

Former President Mohamed Nasheed has been apprehended on terrorism charges following arrest of Chief Judge of Criminal Court Abdulla Mohamed against law. Criminal Court has said that in addition to Nasheed, former Defence Minister Tholhath Ibrahim Kaleyfaan, Defence Minister Moosa Ali Jaleel, Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) former Brigadier General and Hithadhoo-Medhu MP Ibrahim Mohamed Didi, and Colonel (Retired) Mohamed Ziyad have also been charged with terrorism.

The Commonwealth expresses concern about the arrest of Nasheed³⁷

In light of recent developments in the Maldives, the Commonwealth has called on the government to ensure that the rule of law is respected, with adherence to due process and in accordance with the Commonwealth Charter. This came in a statement by Commonwealth Spokesperson Victoria Holdsworth on February 23. Holdsworth noted the arrest of former President Mohamed Nasheed on charges of terrorism, and said that the Commonwealth Secretary-General was concerned to the reports that Nasheed was denied the right to legal representation at the court hearing that took place on February 23.

The Transparency Maldives calls for fair legal proceedings for Nasheed³⁸

Transparency Maldives has issued a statement calling for fair and transparent legal proceedings, free from politicisation and in accordance with the principles of justice, for former President Mohamed Nasheed and former Defence Minister Mohamed Nazim. The organisation noted with concern the escalating political tensions in the Maldives, and appealed to all actors to uphold the rule of law and the constitution, and to engage in dialogue to resolve political disputes.

MDP-JP alliance organises protest rally demanding the release of Nasheed³⁹

In the big protest rally organised by the MDP-JP alliance on February 27 demanding the immediate release of the former president Mohamed Nasheed who is charged with terrorism and the former Defence Minister Colonel-retired Mohamed Nazim who is charged with possession of a firearm. About the MDP-JP protest, the spokesperson for the President's Office Ibrahim Muaz said that the demands were not something that the government can subject to and the demands were baseless.

Minister of Foreign Affairs asks international community not to comment on the arrest⁴⁰

Minister of Foreign Affairs Dunya Maumoon has said that the international community should not comment on activities that take place in the Maldives that follow the country's constitution and laws. Dunya's remarks came in relation to

statements issued by some countries and international organisations, regarding the arrest of former President Mohamed Nasheed.

Qasim Ibrahim meets the President of Sri Lanka⁴¹

Leader of Jumhooree Party (JP) Qasim Ibrahim met the President of Sri Lanka Maithripala Sirisena to share the state of Maldivian democracy. Qasim left the country to discuss the state of the democracy in Maldives with foreign leaders on February 26. The JP leader left the country after organising a joint MDP-JP rally to defend the constitutions.

Special envoys left for Japan and China⁴²

Economic Minister Mohamed Saeed, State Minister of Finance Ahmed Munawar and Foreign Secretary Ali Naseer left for China and Japan as special envoys to hasten the development of Ibrahim Nasir International Airport.

President Yameen postpones the visit to Pakistan⁴³

The state visit by President Abdulla Yameen to Pakistan has been postponed for the second time indefinitely. The President's visit to Pakistan scheduled for June 2014 was postponed for security reasons, following a terror attack in the country. President Yameen's Spokesperson Ibrahim Muaz said that the visit was postponed as advised by security officials in both countries.

The second Advanced Light Helicopter gifted by India is ready for deployment⁴⁴

India has said that the second Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) gifted by India is ready for deployment to the Maldives. This came in a press release by the High Commission of India in the Maldives, following recent rumours regarding the India-Maldives defence and security co-operation. "The second ALH was given in December 2013 again on the request of the Government of Maldives to further strengthen coastal and EEZ surveillance. The High Commission refuted claims about India's refusal to train Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) soldiers operating the helicopter, and said that it has been India's constant endeavour to ensure that Maldives is self-sufficient in operating the assets gifted by India. In this regard, India said that one flight engineer and one technician from the MNDF have completed the ALH technical courses in November 2014, and two slots for ALH pilot training have also been offered to MNDF in 2015. The High Commission further refuted claims that the crew of Kurangi, the first ALH gifted by India, flew across some areas of Maldives without orders, and said that the Indian crew members who provide technical support are under the operational control of the MNDF, and can fly Kurangi only on authorisation by the MNDF. Reportedly, Maldives has rejected India's offer to train helicopter pilots, and instead suggested that the two new helicopters be operated by Indian pilots, as is done presently.

The Indian Navy aircraft employed in the search mission in the Maldives⁴⁵

Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) has said that an aircraft of the Indian Navy is being employed in the search for the three people who remain missing after a landing craft known as "Coral Craft" was discovered capsized near Baa atoll.

Maldives wishes to buy patrol boats from Bangladesh⁴⁶

Maldives has expressed interest in buying patrol boats from Bangladesh. Reportedly, Maldives' National Defence Force (MNDF) Chief of Defence Major General Mohamed Shiyam said this to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina while paying a courtesy call on her at Jatiya Sangsad Office on February 10, as part of his ongoing visit to Bangladesh.

Maldivian government does not support the IS: Minister of Islamic Affairs⁴⁷

Minister of Islamic Affairs Dr. Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed has said that the Maldivian government does not support the Islamic State (IS). This follows allegations by opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) members, former foreign minister Ahmed Naseem and former parliamentarian Hamid Abdul Ghafoor, in an interview to Indian paper The New Indian Express that the Maldivian Islamic Affairs Minister was behind sending some Maldivians to Syria – and funding these operations.

China-Maldives discuss the safety and security of Chinese tourists⁴⁸

The first convening of the 'Joint Meeting Mechanism' to discuss the safety and security of Chinese tourists in the Maldives was held between Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon and Chinese Ambassador Wang Fukang. The joint mechanism was agreed under an MoU signed during Chinese President Xi Jinping's official visit to the Maldives in September 2014.

Decline in number of tourists in Maldives⁴⁹

Number of tourists visited the Maldives this January went down by 7.8 percent compared to the corresponding period last year. An analysis conducted by the Ministry of Tourism shows 105,296 tourists visited the country in January 2014. This number has gone down to 97,073 this year. The number of Chinese tourists who visited Maldives has depleted to new lows according to records. Tourist arrivals from China went down from 30,912 last year to 20,469 this year, but China is still the biggest market in the industry. Since the tourist numbers have gone from China, tourist arrival is highest now from the European market. The number of Italian, British and German tourists has gone up.

Relief assistance to the Gaza war's victims by Maldives⁵⁰

Shelter units have been constructed for displaced families in Gaza using the donations provided by the Maldives. Qatar Red Crescent (QRC) said in a progress report titled Relief of Gaza War's Victims by Maldives, dated January 2015, that out of the 100 shelter units to be established under the aid provided by Maldives, 27 have been completed.

Nepal

CA endorses drafting committee report⁵¹

The Constitution Assembly (CA) meeting endorsed the report submitted by the Questionnaire Committee despite the boycott of meeting by the dissenting UCPN (Maoist)-led opposition alliance and Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal (RPP-N). The report was presented before the CA by eldest member of the Committee Kul

Bahadur Gurung. The Committee formed on January 25 was authorised to draft questions on the disputed issues of the new constitution. Accordingly, the committee has come up with 232 questions on the contentious issues including about the wordings of the preamble, amendment provisions, fundamental rights, form of legislative and constitutional bodies, forms of governance, restructuring of the state among others. Tabling the report, CA member Gurung expressed the confidence that the report would facilitate the promulgation of a new constitution. Following the endorsement of the report, the CA meeting was postponed until further notice on the request of UCPN (M) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

PM talks to UCPN (M) chairman to end the political deadlock⁵²

UCPN (Maoist) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal has called on Prime Minister Sushil Koirala at latter's official residence in Baluwatar on February 17 in a bid to clear the cementing political impasse emerged after January 22. In the meeting, the duo held positive discussions on how to end the political deadlock and to take the constitution drafting process ahead. According to sources privy to the development, Prime Minister Koirala said there was no alternative of creating a trustworthy atmosphere for dialogues. Following the meeting, UCPN (M) Chair Dahal said that the meeting was positive and the government should exercise more to formalise the dialogues. Dahal informed that he held the dialogue as an opposition leader but not from the side of 30-party alliance. However, it has created positive environment for further talks, he added. UCPN (Maoist) leader Baburam Bhattarai on the other hand has said that his party will not take part in the dialogue process unless the ongoing Constituent Assembly process is scrapped. He said that taking the questionnaire process ahead and calling for dialogue at the same time was quite confusing and no one could walk in opposite direction at the same time. Meanwhile, leader Bhattarai said the UCPN (M) was ready to be flexible for political consensus on the disputed issues if NC and the CPN-UML became ready to compromise on some issues.

Ex-king Shah urges parties to 'implement past pacts'⁵³

Deposed King Gyanendra Shah requested the political parties to implement all past agreements reached with him, without giving any details of such deals. Issuing a press statement on the eve of the Democracy Day, Shah said there had been some consensus, agreement and legislative activities on the basis of norms and values of democracy and that the parties should follow and implement such pacts. This is a first time in seven years the ex-King has spoken of agreements with seven-party alliance in 2006 while handing over the power to parties through reinstatement of Parliament dissolved in 2006.

UN urges constitution in consensus⁵⁴

UN Under Secretary General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman made separate telephone calls to UCPN (Maoist) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his deputy Baburam Bhattarai on February 13 to discuss the political situation in Nepal. During the talk, Feltman told the Maoist leaders that the United Nations wants to see a new constitution based on consensus among the signatories of the Comprehensive Peace Accord. He also reportedly told the ruling parties to stop

the majority process and resume formal talks to find a solution to the impasse, said a statement issued by the party.

Disqualified PLA fighters chart out struggle plan⁵⁵

Former People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers who were not integrated into the national security agencies have formed a national network to safeguard their rights and launch a peaceful struggle for social change. A two-day gathering of the former Maoist combatants announced a 13-point charter on February 25, demanding state's acknowledgement of their contribution to make the country republic, special relief package for ex-PLA fighters disqualified during integration, setting up a welfare fund and construction of parks and monuments in memory of those killed during the conflict, among others. They have also demanded pension and treatment of former combatants who suffered injury during the war. The charter includes mostly the issues of livelihood and re-integration into the society. The ex-PLA fighters have also objected "the non-compliance" of the past agreements, Comprehensive Peace Agreement in particular, and have drawn the attention of the government and the UN towards it.

CPN Maoist turning into military force: Chand⁵⁶

Netra Bikram Chand-led CPN Maoist has claimed that it has begun transforming the newly formed party into a 'militant' one, with military training to its full-time cadres which mainly constitute members of the former People Liberation Army (PLA) and Young Communist League. A meeting of CPN Maoist party leaders had decided to "immediately formulate and work on developing the military". A central committee team headed by party coordinator Chand would lead the militant force. The CPN Maoist, which split from the Mohan Baidya led CPN-Maoist with nearly 40 percent central committee members, is estimated to boast between 10,000-15,000 full time cadres. The party has also kicked off a campaign offering salary to retain former PLA members in the process of going out for foreign jobs. According to the leaders, a growing number of UCPN (Maoist) and CPN-Maoist cadres, supporting the extreme left ideology, have been entering into the new party. It is not immediately clear how the party aims to manage arms and ammunition for the paramilitary activities. The party reportedly have a 'few hundred' weapons used during the 'people's war'. Sources said that the party plans to intensify its 'donation campaign' to raise funds to buy arms and ammunition and manage other party activities.

Nepal, India postpone joint boundary work⁵⁷

Nepal and India have postponed the field work to repair, maintain and upgrade border pillars till March 11 following request from the Indian side. The field work was scheduled to commence from far east section but the authorities said the Indian side requested the Nepali side to carry out the work simultaneously from three stretches—Taplejung to Sunsari, Sunsari to Chitwan and Chitwan to Darchula—starting March 11. The two countries have prepared 182 sheets of boundary maps which include highly disputed areas such as Susta and Kalapani. The two areas spreading over 40 kilometres of the 1751-kilometre Nepal-India border were not covered in earlier surveys. Officials from the two countries met in Biratnagar and

Birgunj in the first week of February and decided to begin field work on the both sides of the boundary. The two sides aim to complete the maintenance of border pillars within four years. This is the first time Nepal and India are conducting filed survey simultaneously in three sections.

India to release Rs 700 million for embankment projects⁵⁸

India has agreed to release an additional Rs 700 million to complete the remaining work of embankment extension along Lalbakaiya, Bagmati and Kamala rivers. During a meeting of the Nepal- India Joint Committee on Inundation and Flood Management, the Indian side agreed to release the amount while approving 18 new packages of technical work on these rivers. India has already disbursed Rs 3.2 billion for embankment construction and river training. Around 80 percent training and embankment works in Lalbakaiya, Bagmati and Kamala rivers have been completed. With India pledging additional fund, the Nepali side will call tenders to complete the project. Meanwhile, Nepal has urged India to halt the road project along the Nepal-India border until both the sides come up with a solution to water drainage. The road being constructed parallel to the international border could obstruct the natural flow of rivers and cause flooding on the Nepali side.

IOC agrees to five year oil supply contract agreement⁵⁹

Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) has agreed to Nepal's proposal of a five-year oil supply contract agreement, paving the way for the construction of the much-delayed Nepal-India petroleum pipeline. Earlier, the IOC had been insisting on a 15-year agreement. A senior official at Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) said the IOC agreed to Nepal's proposal in a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which the NOC has forwarded to the government. The long-awaited project got momentum after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke about the construction of the pipeline during his Nepal visit in August 2014. The IOC has agreed to put in Rs 5.5 billion for the construction of the 41-km pipeline that will supply petroleum products from IOC's depot in Raxaul to NOC's depot in Amlekhgunj. Of the total cost, pipeline construction and land acquisition costs are estimated at Rs 2.5 billion. Rest of the funds will be used for other work, including capacity upgradation of NOC's Amlekhgunj depot, its automation, and construction of a pumping station.

UK minister visits Nepal⁶⁰

The UK Minister for International Development Desmond Swayne visited Nepal to see DFID's bilateral programmes and how the UK, Nepal's largest bilateral donor, is supporting efforts to combat poverty and promote economic growth. He arrived in Kathmandu on February 18 on a three-day visit. This was his first visit to Nepal since his appointment in July 2014. During his visit Swayne met Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat to discuss the future of UK development support to Nepal, including how to build on the more than 100 million Pounds Sterling committed by the UK for the financial year 2015/16, said a British Embassy statement. As the two countries approach 200 years of friendship, UK is looking at how to support Nepal in its efforts to graduate from least developed country status by 2022, said the statement. A meeting with the Investment Board of Nepal

focused on how development assistance could facilitate the private sector investment that is important to unlocking Nepal's hydropower potential. He also visited a community near Pokhara to see a DFID-funded Disaster Risk Reduction programme.

Finance Minister Mahat visits Japan⁶¹

Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat, who went to Japan on the invitation of Japan International Co-operation Agency, held separate meetings with Parliamentary Senior Vice-Minister for Finance Isshu Sugawara, Parliamentary Senior Vice-Minister for Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Issei Kitagawa and Parliamentary Senior Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Minoru Kiuchi on February 12. Nepali Ambassador to Japan Madan Kumar Bhattarai said during these meetings Mahat apprised the Japanese dignitaries on the current political situation and the status of constitution writing. Mahat also emphasised on increased investments and aid to expedite the process of Nepal's socio-economic transformation to graduate from the least developed to middle income country.

China Exim bank approves loan to build new Pokhara airport⁶²

China Exim Bank has agreed to extend a \$215.96 million soft loan to the government of Nepal to build the Pokhara Regional International Airport. The finance ministry of Nepal had asked the Chinese bank for funding last November after the Cabinet gave the go-ahead to construct the much-delayed project on October 27. The proposed airport will be built at Chinnedanda, 3 km east of the existing domestic airport in the lakeside city. The ministry has approached the bank for a loan to build the airport on two previous occasions. The first time it had asked for \$145 million when the project was estimated to cost \$166 million. However, the projected outlay was revised after the short listed bidder China CAMC Engineering Co. quoted a price of \$305 million. So the ministry had requested to borrow \$278 million the second time.

EU envoys meet PM Koirala⁶³

A delegation of EU ambassadors to Nepal called on Prime Minister Sushil Koirala at the latter's official residence in Baluwatar on February 2. Ambassadors from the UK, Germany, France, Finland, Norway and Switzerland were in the delegation headed by EU Ambassador Rensje Teerink. According to a press statement issued by PM's press aide, the EU ambassadors discussed the current political situation of Nepal, progress in the constitution-drafting and EU political assistance to Nepal.

PM Koirala meets ADB chief Nakao⁶⁴

Prime Minister Sushil Koirala met Asian Development Bank (ADB) President Takehiko Nakao on February 2 and appreciated the lender's continuous support in Nepal's development. Nakao was on a three-day visit to Nepal to mark the 25th anniversary of the establishment of ADB Nepal Resident Mission.

Nepal GDP to grow at 4-5 percent: ADB⁶⁵

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has projected Nepal's economy to grow between 4-5 percent this fiscal year based on the assumptions of two scenarios of

Pakistan

agricultural, industrial and service sector growth. Likewise, inflation has been projected to remain between 7-8 percent. The ADB's forecast has come a few days after the government made a downward revision of its growth estimate to 5 percent from the targeted 6 percent and of inflation to 7.8 percent from the estimated 8 percent.

Pakistan reacts sharply on the coastguard boat issue⁶⁶

Pakistan reacted sharply to the disclosure of Indian DIG Coast Guard B.K. Loshal's statement that the attack on the Pakistani boat on December 31 was carried out by the Indian Coast Guard. "It has once again been proven that India has violated international rules and disregarded the humanitarian considerations," Defence Minister Khawaja Asif said in a statement. The defence minister called upon the international community to take notice of the incident, which, it has been said, is tearing off India's veil of being a peaceful country in the region. The minister went on to say that India not only imposed baseless and false allegations on Pakistan before like in the case of Samjhota Express, but were involved in treacherously killing four innocent lives on board this boat. Asif said that Loshali has contradicted the Indian government's statement which had been adamant that the boat had 'suspected terror links' and that the crew had committed suicide by setting the vessel on fire.

Pakistan to continue supporting Kashmiri freedom struggle: Nawaz⁶⁷

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said that Pakistan would continue its political and diplomatic support for the people of Kashmir in their struggle for freedom and right to self-determination. Nawaz was addressing the "Azad Jammu and Kashmir" Legislative Assembly on the occasion of Kashmir Day. The premier said only a fair resolution of the dispute would ensure lasting peace in the region and urged the international community to play its part in this regard.

Pakistan will not accept India as UNSC permanent member: Nawaz⁶⁸

Pakistan made it clear to the United States it would not accept India as a permanent member of United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif expressed these reservations while speaking with US President Barack Obama on the phone on February 12, the PM House said in a statement. The prime minister said India cannot become a UNSC permanent member due to its non-compliance of all the resolutions passed by UN regarding Kashmir, added the spokesman. The US president called Sharif to discuss issues of mutual interest and those related to regional stability and peace.

ISI chief completes US visit⁶⁹

ISI chief Lt. General Rizwan Akhtar made a visit to the United States as the new head of the country's prime intelligence agency. During his four-day stay in Washington, General Akhtar held a series of meetings with senior officials at the White House, State Department and the Department of Defence. Being a guest of CIA chief John Owen Brennan, he met the heads of all major US intelligence agencies and briefed them on the security situation in the Pak-Afghan region. At the White House, the ISI chief and his team, which included Director General Counter-

terrorism Major General Tariq Qudus, had a detailed meeting with US Homeland Security Adviser Lisa Monaco and her team.

Islamic State a serious threat to Pakistan, Foreign secretary admits⁷⁰

The Pakistan foreign office broke its silence regarding the Islamic State's (IS) activities inside Pakistan, admitting that the radical Islamist group posed a "serious threat" to the country. Speaking to the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee at Parliament House on February 23, Foreign Secretary Azaz Ahmed Chaudhry acknowledged IS was indeed a real concern, while simultaneously assuring those present that the government would take all steps necessary to counter the threat. Chaudhry disclosed that after Operation Zarb-e-Azb was launched in North Waziristan, some extremist elements tried to emerge together on the IS platform, but their efforts were countered.

Chinese foreign minister visits Pakistan⁷¹

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made an official visit to Pakistan. During the visit, Yi met Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and informed that the purpose of his visit was to prepare for President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan. Welcoming Yi on his first official visit to Pakistan, Prime Minister Sharif said that friendship with China is the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy, emphasising that China has always been a sincere friend of Pakistan. Prime Minister further said security for Chinese nationals working in Pakistan is a matter of high priority for Pakistan and special arrangements are being made for this purpose. Pakistan and China are celebrating 2015 as their year of friendly exchanges which has formally begun with Wang Yi's visit and will be followed by a series of high level bilateral visits from both sides. During the visit, Foreign Minister Wang Yi met Army Chief General Raheel Sharif at the General Headquarters (GHQ) in Islamabad and discussed security matters and bilateral defence cooperation. A meeting was also held between Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif and Wang Yi in which promotion of bilateral cooperation and projects under Pak-China economic corridor were discussed in detail. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said China would continue to cooperate with Punjab in energy, minerals, industry and other sectors.

Lease agreement with China being processed⁷²

A lease agreement is being processed to hand over 2,281 acres of land to the China Overseas Port Holding Company for the establishment of a 'free trade zone' in Gwadar. According to a senior official of the ministry of ports and shipping, the lease agreement is currently being reviewed by the law division. After the government's formal approval, the land will be leased out to the Chinese company for 40 years. The ministry has paid over Rs 6.69 billion to acquire the land through the deputy commissioner of Gwadar. The Chinese company has been incorporated as the 'Gwadar Free Zone Company'. It will finance infrastructure development of the zone area, with the exception of access roads, which will be financed by the Gwadar Port Authority. The company will bring local and foreign investment to establish the manufacturing assembly and processing plants. The zone will be located immediately west and adjacent to the planned container terminal. Out of 2,281 acres, 654 acres are naval and coast-guard land, for which the owners will

compensate with 1,000 acres under a deal approved by the Senate Standing Committee on Ports and Shipping. A 20-year tax holiday will apply to businesses in the free trade zone. Under the agreement, 15 percent of gross revenue from the free zone will be paid to the Gwadar Port Authority by the Chinese company.

Cabinet approves Pak-China economic corridor⁷³

The federal cabinet gave approval for the Pak-China economic corridor. Approval was also given along with for starting negotiations with Beijing for importing 1000 megawatts of electricity from China by laying a new transmission line. The Pak-China Economic Corridor (PCEC) is the country's biggest road project recently launched by the government. Work on one of the sections of the PCEC was initiated in December last year, under which a motorway from Havelian to Thakot as phase-I of the Islamabad-Raikot section of the corridor would be constructed. The Havelian to Thakot section of the corridor is being financed by China while other phases will be carried out on the basis of Built Operate and Transfer.

Parliamentary delegation from EU visits Pakistan⁷⁴

A parliamentary delegation comprising members of the European Union (EU) paid a visit to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Islamabad on February 17. The delegation comprised Ambassador and Head of Delegation of the EU to Pakistan Lars-Gunnar Wigemark, Chief EU Observer Michael Gahler, Sajjad Karim, Richard Howitt and Jean Lambert. The prime minister emphasised in the meeting that Pakistan lays great importance on its relations with EU countries and that he is in favour of regular consultations between the Pakistani and EU parliamentarians. Speaking to the delegation, the prime minister noted with satisfaction that the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) status granted to Pakistan in 2013 had greatly benefited its economy as its exports to the EU had increased to around US \$1 billion.

Pakistan navy takes over command of anti-piracy task force⁷⁵

The Pakistan Navy took over the command of the Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151) at a change of command ceremony held at its headquarters in Bahrain on February 27. Pakistan has previously led the multinational force five times. The CTF-151 is responsible for counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia and Horn of Africa under the ambit of Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). Vice Admiral John W. Miller, CMF Commander, presided over the ceremony. Commodore Asif Hameed Siddiqui, who took over the command from Rear Admiral Pakorn Wanich of the Royal Thailand Navy, said that although incidents of piracy had declined they continued to present an intricate and extraordinary threat, which impacted energy security, freedom of navigation, global security and stability. The CMF is a naval partnership of 30 nations tasked to promote security, stability and prosperity across approximately 2.5 million square miles of international waters, which encompass some of the world's most important shipping lanes. The Pakistan Navy in the backdrop of a UN Security Council resolution joined the CTF-151 in 2009 to combat piracy and since then is an integral part of it.

Australian defence chief calls on General Raheel Sharif⁷⁶

Pakistan and Australia have agreed to enhance cooperation in the field of defence and security, including military training, during talks between visiting Australian Chief of Defence Force (CDF) Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin and Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif at Army General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi.

30,000 Afghans left Pakistan after Army Public school attack: IOM⁷⁷

More than 30,000 Afghans living in Pakistan have returned home since the start of the year after coming under intense scrutiny following a Taliban massacre at the Army Public School Peshawar in December, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). There are an estimated three million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan either officially or unofficially, most of whom left their country to escape conflict in the 1980s and 1990s. But they are viewed with deep suspicion inside Pakistan and routinely accused by authorities of harbouring militants. According to Richard Danziger, head of the IOM mission in Kabul, out of the 30,599 Afghans who had left Pakistan since January, 1,817 had been deported while the rest had left of their own accord.

FATF removes Pakistan from list of terror financiers⁷⁸

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) has removed Pakistan from its Grey list owing to its improvement in combating the twin menaces of money laundering and terrorist financing. The Paris-based FATF, the international body which sets standards for Anti-money Laundering/Combating Financing for Terrorism (AML/CFT), in its plenary meeting held in France removed Pakistan from the list which contained adverse remarks. Pakistan was placed on the Grey list in February 2012 on the plea that the country was not fully compliant with the standards for effectively combating the twin menaces. Finance Minister Ishaq Dar welcomed the decision, saying "Pakistan's removal from FATF Grey list is a timely and welcome development".

Pakistan can avail WB's \$2 billion development funding⁷⁹

After a lapse of three years, Pakistan has qualified to avail the World Bank's International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) funding worth \$2 billion for the next four fiscal years (2015-19). "Pakistan is now maintaining foreign exchange reserves of more than 2.5 months of projected imports and has also satisfied other criteria of World Bank under the Country Partnership Strategy (CPS)," WB Country Director Rachid Benmessaoud said. Benmessaoud disclosed this to Finance Minister Ishaq Dar while discussing matters relating to a road map of the country's development in the coming years.

IMF team gives go-ahead to sixth tranche of \$550 million⁸⁰

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission recommended the release of the sixth tranche of \$550 million to Pakistan as discussions between delegations of both sides concluded in Dubai. Outgoing Chief of the IMF Mission to Pakistan Jeffery Franks led the team which held talks with the Pakistani delegation which was led by Finance Minister Ishaq Dar and also included State Bank Governor

Ashraf Wathra and other senior officials. The recommendations reached on the completion of the sixth review of Pakistan's \$6.6 billion three years Extended Fund Facility (EFF), approved by the IMF's executive board in September 2013. It will be forwarded to the IMF Executive Board in the United States which would give final approval for the release of \$550 million tranche.

Pakistan conducts flight test of Ra'ad⁸¹

Pakistan conducted a successful flight test of the indigenously developed Air Launched Cruise Missile (ALCM) "Ra'ad", said an Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) press release. The Ra'ad missile, with a range of 350 km, enables Pakistan to achieve 'strategic standoff capability' on land and at sea.

Pakistan discovers reserves of iron ore⁸²

Pakistan has discovered major reserves of iron ore as well as copper, silver and gold in its central province of Punjab. The reserves were found in Chiniot, around 160 kilometres northwest of Lahore, by the Metallurgical Cooperation of China. The Chinese company has reportedly, expressed interest in setting up a steel mill on the site.

Sri Lanka

President Sirisena visits India⁸³

Sri Lanka's new president Maithripala Sirisena came to India on February 15 on his first foreign trip in office. President Sirisena was accompanied by his wife Jayanthi Pushpa Kumari. India and Sri Lanka signed four agreements during the four day visit of President Sirisena. The agreements were signed on February 16 following the bilateral talks between President Sirisena and Prime Minister Modi. The agreements include: Agreement on cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, Programme of cultural cooperation between Sri Lanka and India for the years 2015 – 18, MoU on the establishment of Nalanda University, and the Work Plan 2014 – 2015 under the MoU on cooperation the field of agriculture between India and Sri Lanka. The United States has welcomed the signing of civil nuclear cooperation agreement between India and Sri Lanka, saying it is consistent with IAEA safeguards and other international standards and practices. President Sirisena visited Bodh Gaya and Tirupati before returning back to Sri Lanka.

India-Sri Lanka fishermen talk postponed⁸⁴

Talks between India and Sri Lanka on fishing in the Palk Bay and Palk Strait, which were to be held in Chennai on March 5, have been postponed indefinitely because the Sri Lankan government is busy with other more pressing issues, according to the Director General of Fisheries, Nimal Hettiarachchi. Meanwhile, Sri Lankan navy has arrested 86 Indian fishermen for poaching in Sri Lankan waters. Navy spokesman Indika Silva said that the fishermen were arrested east of Mullaitivu and their boats were also seized.

40 refugees return back from India⁸⁵

About 40 refugees from various camps in Tamil Nadu voluntarily returned to Sri Lanka with the assistance of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Foreign Minister Samaraweera meets British Foreign Office Minister⁸⁶

Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera had talks with British Foreign Office Minister Hugo Swire in London on February 9. Mangala Samaraweera was in the UK on his way to the US.

Sign of improving relations between the USA and Sri Lanka⁸⁷

US Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Biswal made a two day visit in Sri Lanka aimed at establishing ties with the new government which came to power following the January 8 Presidential Elections. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera was in the US to brief US Secretary of State John Kerry and UN Secretary General Ban ki-moon on the efforts being taken by the new Government to address human rights concerns and also sought to mend ties with the US, which had been strained after the former government refused to work with the US on the human rights issue. During the two day visit to the USA, the Minister held a range of meetings including with Secretary of State John Kerry, National Security Adviser Susan Rice, co-chairs of the Sri Lanka Caucus in the US Congress, Chris Van Hollen and Robert Aderholt, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Congressman Ed Royce and Ranking Member of the Committee, Congressman Eliot Engel. He also addressed a full house at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The Government of Sri Lanka says that the visit to the United States by Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera, was successful. In a sign of improving relations with the U S, Sri Lanka has terminated lobbying contracts worth tens of thousands of dollars a month that the previous government had signed to help it win friends in Washington amid war crimes allegations.

The US sends demining equipment to Sri Lanka⁸⁸

The United States has sent demining equipment worth nearly 300 million Sri Lankan rupees, according to the US Embassy in Colombo. Lieutenant Dave Chesson from the U.S. Embassy delivered the donated equipment to assist with demining efforts in the former war-affected areas of Sri Lanka on February 24. The shipment is a part of continuing US assistance with demining efforts across the country since 2009, the US Embassy in Colombo added. Major General Lasantha Wickramasuriya, Chief Field Engineer, and Brigadier Jagath Gunawardane, Commander Engineer Brigade, received the donated equipment from the U.S. Embassy.

Special envoy of the government of China visits Sri Lanka⁸⁹

Special Envoy of the Government of China, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, Liu Jianchao visited Sri Lanka from February 5-7, 2015. During the visit, Jianchao paid calls on President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The visiting dignitary also held bilateral talks with Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera and Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake. The Foreign Ministry said that the discussions focused on issues of mutual interest covering bilateral political, economic, development cooperation and people-to-people contacts.

Minister of Foreign Affairs visits China⁹⁰

Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera left for a two day visit to China on February 25. During the visit, Samaraweera paid a courtesy call on the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and also held extensive bilateral discussions with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, as well as met with the Vice Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and Minister of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Wang Jiarui and the Minister of Commerce, Gao Hucheng. Minister Samaraweera had informed the Chinese side that it was the desire of the new Government of Sri Lanka to further strengthen the warm and robust bilateral relations and the cooperative partnership which would be the key objective of the upcoming state visit to China by President Maithripala Sirisena.

Petition filed against Colombo port city project⁹¹

A petition was filed at the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) on February 23 against the Colombo Port City project by environmental groups. The environmental groups said that the human rights of the public, including fishermen, had been violated as a result of the Chinese funded project. They also alleged that an initial environment assessment report issued by a leading Sri Lankan university, which had cleared the project, was issued with the involvement of the Chinese. The environmental groups said that they will stage a protest in Colombo against the project with the participation of fishermen and others. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said that there have been several concerns and allegations over the project, including allegations of corruption and a special committee is still investigating those concerns. Making a statement in Parliament the Prime Minister had said that he had recently informed the Special Envoy of the Government of China, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, Liu Jianchao, that Sri Lanka will not allow any corrupt deals to proceed. He said that China also stands firmly against corruption. Wickremesinghe however noted that the Government wants to further strengthen its ties with China and will not allow the Port City project issue to come in the way.

NPC adopts resolution on genocide⁹²

The Northern Provincial Council (NPC) adopted a resolution on February 10, calling for an international investigation into alleged acts of genocide committed against the Tamils. In the resolution, the NPC urged the team appointed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to investigate the war in Sri Lanka, to comprehensively investigate and report on the charge of genocide in its submission to the UN Human Rights Council in March 2015. It also said that the UN Security Council should refer the situation in Sri Lanka to the International Criminal Court for prosecutions based on war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide adding that alternatively or concurrently, domestic courts in countries that may exercise universal jurisdiction over the alleged events and perpetrators, including but not limited to the United States, should prosecute these crimes.

UNHRC agrees to defer report on Sri Lanka⁹³

The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has agreed to defer a report on Sri Lanka which was to be submitted to the Council during its 28th session in March, to September. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein and the team appointed to compile the report after investigating the war in Sri Lanka, had recommended that the report be delayed. The High Commissioner stressed that the deferral of the report was "for one time only," and guaranteed that the report would be published by September. The High Commissioner noted that the three distinguished experts, who were appointed by his predecessor Navi Pillay to advise the investigation, had informed him that, in their unanimous view, a one-off temporary deferral would be the best option to allow space for the new Government to show its willingness to cooperate on human rights issues. Keith Harper, the U.S. representative to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva said that the US supports the consensus decision taken by the Human Rights Council on the report on Sri Lanka.

UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs visits Sri Lanka⁹⁴

United Nations (UN) Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, arrived in Sri Lanka on February 28 on a four day visit. Tamil National Alliance (TNA) had talks with Feltman, on several issues, including on the proposed domestic investigation on the war in Sri Lanka and informed the top UN official that they had no faith in a domestic probe. Feltman however had told the TNA that the Government had given an assurance that the domestic probe will meet international standards. He had said that the UN is willing to work with the new Government on the investigation and other issues. Feltman also had separate talks with President Maithripala Sirisena and Deputy Foreign Minister Ajith Perera.

The minister for foreign Affairs and law of Singapore visits Sri Lanka⁹⁵

The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Law of Singapore, K. Shanmugam, who was on a two day visit to Sri Lanka, met with Foreign Affairs Minister Mangala Samaraweera on February 23 at the Ministry. The visit, marking the first high-level interaction of the Singapore Government with the new Sri Lankan Government demonstrates the keenness of Singapore to reinforce and reaffirm the continuity of the close and robust bilateral relations between the two countries. Shanmugam also met President Maithripala Sirisena and praised the new Sri Lankan government's efforts for development and reconciliation. President Sirisena said Sri Lanka, as a middle-income country is keen to study the success story of Singapore and take lessons from that country to speed up the development in Sri Lanka. He asked the visiting Singapore Foreign Affairs minister to encourage Singaporean industrialists to invest in Sri Lanka. He thanked Singapore for the support given for English teacher training programme in North and East Provinces and technical training projects in different parts of the country.

The Iranian Navy docks 33rd naval fleet at the port of Colombo⁹⁶

The Iranian Navy's 33rd naval fleet has docked at the port of Colombo in Sri Lanka as Iran seeks to expand its naval presence in international waters. The Iranian flotilla, consisting of the Bandar Abbas auxiliary ship and Naqdi destroyer, arrived

at the port, the largest in Sri Lanka as well as in south Asia on February 9 after travelling approximately 5,000 km.

Sri Lanka expresses concerns about the developments in Maldives⁹⁷

Sri Lanka, as a friendly neighbouring country is concerned about the recent developments in Maldives, the External Affairs Ministry of Sri Lanka said on February 25. The Ministry said that Sri Lanka hopes that all stakeholders in Maldives will resolve their differences in a peaceful manner, within the legal provisions in Maldives.

Major General De Silva appointed as the 21st Commander of the Sri Lanka Army⁹⁸

Major General A. W. J. C. De Silva has been appointed as the 21st Commander of the Sri Lanka Army, effective from February 22, 2015. The Ministry of Defence said that the new Army Chief has been appointed on the directions of the President Maithripala Sirisena as the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. Major General A.W.J.C De Silva replaces Lieutenant General Daya Ratnayake as the Commander of the Sri Lanka Army.

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