

SOUTH ASIA TRENDS

February 2016

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

The February issue of the South Asia Trends covers the important developments in the region. The section on Afghanistan focuses on the status of the proposed peace process in Afghanistan, combat-operation against the militant groups within the country, deportation of Afghan refugees and foreign financial assistance to deal with the debt burden in Afghanistan.

Bangladesh section envelopes the developments in the India-Bangladesh relations; diplomatic tensions between Bangladesh and Pakistan; Bangladesh's relations with extra regional countries, and updates on country's economy.

In Bhutan, several new ambassadors from foreign countries presented their credentials to The King. The segment also presents Indian assistance to Bhutan.

Section on Maldives highlights the interactions between the International Community and the Maldivian authority on the current political situations of the Island; Indian Naval Ships visit to the Maldives and inauguration of the Japanese Embassy and National Counter Terrorism Centre in Male.

Among several political and economic developments, withdrawal of the six months blockade by the Madhesi Morcha, and Prime Minister K.P. Oli's visit to India were the main focus in Nepal in the month of February.

Interesting developments in Pakistan's bilateral relations with India, Afghanistan, USA, Iran, Qatar, the Netherlands and the EU; and its proposal in the UN for extension of "right to self determination to people living under foreign occupation", and the need to combat "Islamophobia" found space in the section on Pakistan.

Sri Lanka section outlines the developments in Sri Lanka's relations with India, USA, Iran, New Zealand, Germany, Austria, and the UN. Reports on the status of the Sri Lankan economy were also included in this issue.

Afghanistan

CEO Abdullah Abdullah visits India¹

Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Afghanistan, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on February 1, 2016 in New Delhi. During the meeting, the two leaders shared views on further deepening the strategic partnership, both in the bilateral and regional context. An Agreement for visa free travel for diplomatic passport holders of the two countries was exchanged in the presence of the two leaders. He also met External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. After the meeting, India approved the third phase of 92 small development projects in Afghanistan. During his four day visit, the CEO Abdullah attended a conference on counter-terrorism on February 2, organised by the India Foundation in association with Sardar Patel University of Police Security and Criminal Justice.

Quadrilateral Coordination Group holds its meeting in Pakistan²

Senior officials from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States held talks in Islamabad to finalise the roadmap to the Afghan reconciliation dialogue on February 6. Pakistan has offered to host the first round of direct talks between the Afghan Government and Taliban representatives following the conclusion of the fourth round of Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) meeting. The QCG has given a task to Pakistan to bring 10 influential Taliban figures for the upcoming direct peace talks with the Afghan Government. An Afghan government official privy of the development told Radio Free Europe (RFE) that the 10 influential Taliban figures have been identified by the Afghan Government. The official speaking on the condition of anonymity further added that leaders of the Haqqani network were also among those influential leaders. Responding to the development, the representatives of Taliban in Qatar have said that they are “unaware of plans for talks” and that they had not changed its preconditions for joining the peace process. However, according to another media report, two senior Taliban leaders Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, head of the Taliban’s political office in Qatar, and Qari Din Muhammad travelled to Islamabad and held informal discussions with senior officials from the four countries and shared a list of their representatives for formal talks with the Afghan Government. The Afghan Government said on February 28 that it will hold negotiations only with Taliban factions that denounce violence. Meanwhile a representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Moscow does not want to participate in the US initiatives aimed at establishing stability and peace in Afghanistan. However, Russia is ready to set up a negotiation process independently, if requested.

Pakistan and Afghan armies agree on better border coordination³

Pakistan and Afghan military commanders agreed on January 30, 2016 on better coordination and enhancing security measures at both sides of the border, during a meeting between an eight-member delegation of Afghan National Army headed by Corps Commander Lieutenant General Mohammad Sharif Yaftali and his Pakistani counterparts in Peshawar. Both militaries have also established a hotline to exchange views on security matters in line with decisions taken during the Army Chief’s visit.

Pakistani and Afghan officials hold anti-terror talks⁴

Lt. General Rizwan Akhtar, the Director General of Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence held nearly two-hour talks with Masoud Andarabi, Chief of Afghan National Directorate of Security in Islamabad on February 4, 2016 in an effort to boost intelligence sharing and bridge trust gap. The meeting of the intelligence chiefs reviewed options to build trust that is necessary for security cooperation. Senior military officials of the two countries also met in the Pakistani city of Rawalpindi on February 4 and both sides "reiterated that terrorists operating on either side of border will not be allowed to use their soil for any terrorist activity on either side of the border."

China's role vital in Afghan peace talks: Ghani⁵

President Ashraf Ghani during a meeting with Chinese ambassador in Kabul said China was playing an important role in bringing peace to Afghanistan. The ambassador said China's perception about Afghanistan had taken a positive turn after Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao's visit to Kabul in November last year. He took into confidence President Ghani about his call for practical work on the construction of the railroad between China and Afghanistan and said an agreement on cooperation in this regard would be signed soon so that Afghanistan could benefit from the mega project.

Gen. Campbell rules out Taliban's return to power⁶

The US and NATO top commander in Afghanistan on February 7 said the international community would never accept the return of Taliban to rule, saying the only way with the rebels was to join the peace process. Gen. John Campbell was speaking at the first meeting of the joint commission of Afghanistan, US and NATO on implementation of security programs in Kabul. He said Afghanistan would not have the current military force if Kabul had not signed the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US and Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with NATO. Calling Taliban as Afghanistan's enemy, the US general said that the Haqqani network, part of the Taliban, were killing Afghan civilians and did not want development, education, women's rights and Afghan forces in Afghanistan. Campbell stressed operations by the Resolute Support (RS) mission against the Taliban and said the RS would continue supporting Afghan forces to make them stronger.

HPC funds halted over leadership issue: Qasimyar⁷

Financial assistance provided by some countries to the High Peace Council (HPC) has been suspended due to the absence of council's leadership and non-active role, a senior HPC member said. According to Mohammad Ismael Qasimyar, HPC's international affairs advisor, since five months the peace council's funds had been stopped. He said the countries that provided funds earlier had now demanded the nomination of HPC chief and its active role as prime condition to release the promise funds. According to Qasimyar the leadership issue at the peace council would be resolved soon, adding that US, United Kingdom (UK), Japan and Germany were the main financiers of the HPC in the country. According to reports amount \$800

million has been so far spent on peace council and its committees since few years. Some believed the HPC had no gains despite extravagant use of resources and money. But Abdul Hakim Mujahid, acting chief of the HPC, said the council spent 2.8 million annually and the total \$15 million had been spent until now since the inception of HPC.

Iran rejects coercing Afghans to fight in Syria⁸

Human Rights Watch accuses Iran's Revolutionary Guards that has recruited thousands of Afghans, some by coercion, to fight in Syria. An official with Iran's foreign ministry has rejected reports on sending Afghan immigrants to Syria to fight alongside forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, according to Iran's ISNA news agency report. Reportedly, the source speaking on condition of anonymity said that claims about sending Afghans right into the middle of the Syrian crisis by some Iranian organisations are not true. The source further said that according to undisclosed evidence, some Afghan nationals involved in the confrontations, have been residing in Syria, while others arrived there from Afghanistan, in some cases, through Iran.

Afghanistan joins US-led international coalition against Daesh: Kerry⁹

Afghanistan has officially joined the international coalition against the Daesh extremist group, bringing the total number of participant-countries to 66, US Secretary of State John Kerry said on February 2, at the Ministerial Meeting of the Small Group of the Global Coalition to Counter Daesh in Rome. The meeting within the framework of the so-called Small Group, comprising 23 countries and the European Union, took place at the Italian Foreign Ministry. It is being chaired by Kerry and Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni.

Afghan Government discusses refugees Issue with the EU¹⁰

Refugees Minister Syed Hussain Alami Balkhi during a meeting with European Union Ambassador Franz-Michael Skjold Mellbin on February 16 agreed to negotiate the issues faced by the Afghan migrants who arrived in Europe, a statement from MoRR said. According to Balkhi a technical team comprised from officials of foreign and work and social affairs ministries led by the Abdul Wali Hukmi, head of the MoRR financial matters would negotiate different matters concerning to refugees with EU. According to the statistics of MoRR as many as 250,000 Afghan migrants in 44 countries of the world especially in Germany arrived and asked for asylum in 2015. Earlier, Germany's Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere visited Afghanistan on February 1 to confer with Afghan officials on longstanding efforts to train Afghan police and on the migration issue. He met officials in Kabul as his country was trying to reduce the number of Afghans heading to Europe and considers how to get some of those who have arrived to return home. Following these meetings a chartered airplane carried back 125 Afghan refugees from Germany on February 24. "The refugees returned voluntarily, in what is expected to be the first of many such flights coordinated between the governments in Kabul and Berlin as well as the International Organization for Migration", according the German embassy in Kabul.

Afghanistan owes \$2.5 billion in foreign loans¹¹

The Ministry of Finance said on February 23 that Afghanistan owed \$2.5 billion in loan it took from foreign countries and financial firms during the past 14 years and efforts were underway to get the loans written off. Mohammad Aqa Kohistani, head of the treasury department, told Afghan media that Afghanistan had borrowed \$970 million from the Russian Federation and the remaining from Iran, the Czech Republic, the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). He said the debts were supposed to be returned back in 40 years. Of the money borrowed, \$2.3 was spent on reconstruction of the country's infrastructure such as roads and airports and the remaining amount was being spent. According to Kohistani, talks with the Russian Government were underway to forgive its \$970 million loan and hopefully they would soon make an announcement. He said negotiations with other loan providers were also underway to forgive the loans. Kohistani said Afghanistan needed loans for completion of some projects and talks in this regard were underway with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Obama administration proposes \$2.5 billion in aid to Afghanistan¹²

The Obama administration proposed \$2.5 billion in financial assistance to Afghanistan on February 9, when Secretary of State, John Kerry said the aid would reinforce the country's security and development.

Minister of Finance Hakimi meets World Bank Director Bob Sum¹³

During his visit to Istanbul, Minister of Finance Eklil Hakimi led a delegation of Ministry of Finance and Da Afghanistan Bank officials at the meeting with the IMF mission team on the economic reform agenda on February 23. A statement from the ministry said that Minister of Finance Eklil Hakimi and World Bank Country Director Bob Sum discussed issues related to national printing companies, IMF mission and the country partnership framework at the meeting.

Japan, UNICEF to give Afghan kids life-saving vaccines¹⁴

Japan signed an agreement to donate \$15.6 million to help eradicate polio and prevent the spread of other vaccine-preventable diseases in Afghanistan. The funds would support UNICEF efforts to provide life-saving vaccines for polio eradication and for the routine expanded programme on immunisation. The vaccines will be available for free at all health facilities and through campaigns across the country. Ambassador of Japan Hiroshi Takahashi and UNICEF Representative Akhil Iyer signed the one-year agreement in the presence of Minister of Public Health Dr. Ferozuddin Feroz on February 17, 2016. The accord will be implemented in coordination with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

Afghan Taliban recruits scores of child soldiers: HWR¹⁵

New York-based Human Rights Watch has accused Afghanistan's Taliban of recruiting scores of children to its ranks for insurgent activities, including the production and planting of improvised explosive devices. The militant group has denied this.

Afghan Government rejects reports of child soldiers in army¹⁶

The Afghan government has dismissed reports on the presence of child soldiers in the security forces as baseless, the state-run news agency Bakhtar News Agency (BNA) reported on February 20. "No child soldier exists in the ranks of Afghan national security forces," Second Vice President Sarwar Danesh said when meeting with Leila Zerrougui, the special representative of UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. According to BNA, the Afghan vice president reiterated the government's commitment to fully implement its Action Plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children in the national security forces.

Landmines, explosives cover 500,000 Sq kms in Afghanistan: UN¹⁷

The United Nations Mine Action Center for Afghanistan UNMACA has raised deep concerns over a surge in civilian casualties caused by landmine explosions in Afghanistan, calling on the warring sides to ensure the safety of civilians. According to UNMACA, up to 500,000 square kilometers of land is covered with landmines and other explosive devices which are causing serious threats to the lives of the people. The statistics revealed by UNMACA shows that on average every month up to 100 people are killed or wounded as a result of landmine explosions and explosions caused by explosive materials.

Election commission releases disputed 2014 Afghan election results¹⁸

Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission publicly confirmed the official results of the disputed 2014 election on February 24, more than a year and a half after the vote that elevated former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani to the presidency. According to the official numbers, Ghani won a runoff election in June 2014 with 55.27 per cent of the vote to Abdullah's 44.73 per cent. It was at the request of both candidates, who now share power as part of a U.S.-brokered unity government, that the election commission delayed the release of the official numbers, said the commission's chief, Ahmad Yousuf Nuristani.

Bamyan titled as the 'World's Creative City' by the UNESCO¹⁹

Bamyan joined the list of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s creative cities in 40 countries of the world in December, 2015. UNESCO says Bamyan is the only province in central Asia and the Middle East winning the title of "world creative city." Historical and ancient monuments, tourism sites, handicrafts, and civil society engagement and people's peaceful way of living are said to be the reasons Bamyan was nominated as a World Creative City. World Creative Cities is an initiative of UNESCO, instituted in 2004.

Bangladesh

Indian Air Force Chief Arup Raha makes official visit to Bangladesh²⁰

Indian Air Force Chief Arup Raha made a five-day official visit to Bangladesh on February 21, 2016. Air Chief Marshall Raha met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her office on February 23. During the meeting Prime Minister Hasina said that the initiatives on regional cooperation like BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal)

and BCIM-EC (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar Economic Corridor) would generate greater economic activities among neighbouring countries, accelerating their development. Terming his visit to Bangladesh significant, the Indian Air Chief said the bilateral relations have reached a new height, adding that the military-to-military cooperation between the two countries has also increased. Raha said India and Bangladesh could work together on disaster management sectors and mentioned that a lot of visits are taking place at military training level between the two neighbours. Bangladesh Prime Minister's International Affairs Adviser Dr. Gowher Rizvi and Indian High Commissioner to Dhaka Harsh Vardhan Shringla were present at the meeting.

Bangladesh foreign secretary makes bilateral visit to India²¹

Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Md. Shahidul Haque, made a two-day bilateral visit to New Delhi at the invitation of his Indian counterpart Dr. S. Jaishankar. The two Foreign Secretaries met on February 1, 2016 and discussed the whole range of bilateral issues including security and peace; water resources management; power and energy sector cooperation; trade, business and investment; development cooperation; sub-regional cooperation; connectivity; regional and multilateral cooperation, and people-to-people contact. The duo took stock of the progress of the implementation of the Joint Declaration issued by the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India in June 2015.

Delegation from ministry of commerce holds meeting with India's DGAD²²

Monoj Kumar Roy, Additional Secretary of the Commerce Ministry led a Bangladesh delegation comprising officials of Tariff Commission, World Trade Organisation (WTO) cell and Jute Department to discuss the anti-dumping and countervailing duties initiated by India on Bangladeshi jute products. The meeting with India's Directorate General of Anti-Dumping and Allied Duties (DGAD) was held in Delhi on February 3. At the meeting Monoj Kumar explained Dhaka's position vis-à-vis India's allegations against Bangladesh giving subsidy and cash incentive to its jute products. The issue came to the fore in October 2015 when the DGAD under the ministry of commerce of India started investigating imposition of anti-dumping and countervailing duties on jute goods exported from Bangladesh based on the claims of Indian Jute Mills Association. "We have made the DGAD of India understand that Bangladesh as an LDC (least developed country) can provide subsidy and cash incentives against exports. Our subsidy and cash incentives, which are decreasing gradually, cannot injure Indian industries," said Monoj Kumar on the outcome of the meeting with the DGAD of India. Monoj Kumar also brought another point to India's attention that as per WTO rules no country can launch investigations against countervailing and anti-dumping duties simultaneously. But India initiated the move simultaneously, he said.

Delhi to take ties with Dhaka to new height²³

Newly appointed Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Harsh Vardhan Shringla said New Delhi gives its highest priority to its relations with Dhaka and wants to carry forward the ties to a "new height". The Indian envoy came up

with the remark when he met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her office in Dhaka on February 7. Shringla also referred to a recent meeting between Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Bangladesh State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam in New Delhi. "India will provide all-out support to Sheikh Hasina's government," the Indian envoy quoted Sushma as saying. At the meeting both sides discussed several bilateral and regional issues of mutual interest. Prime Minister's International Affairs Adviser Gowher Rizvi and Prime Minister's Principal Secretary Abul Kalam Azad were present at the meeting.

Indian firm wins contract to build Rampal power plant²⁴

Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd (BHEL) won a deal to build the much-debated Rampal coal-fired power plant in Bangladesh. BHEL has turned out as the lowest bidder for the 1,320-megawatt coal-based power plant, said Anwarul Azim, the spokesman for the Bangladesh-India Friendship Power Company Ltd (BIFPCL), a joint venture set up to build the plant. The total cost of the project is estimated at \$1.8 billion. The construction is expected to start by June this year. BHEL will have to complete the project in 41 months after the financial closure, which is expected to complete in four months. Reportedly, China's Harbin Electric International Company Ltd, which has power projects in Iran, Turkey and Indonesia among others, lost the bid on technical grounds. The Reuters report also said the Indian government's external lending arm, the Exim Bank, has backed up BHEL's offer with nearly 70 per cent funding of the project's costs at a soft interest rate of around one per cent above Libor, the leading global benchmark for pricing transactions.

Bangladesh to import 120 railway coaches from India²⁵

Bangladesh Railway is going to import 120 modern carriages from India at an estimated cost of over Tk 425 crore, with the first consignment of 40 to arrive in Bangladesh in March. This is the biggest-ever consignment of Linke Hofmann Busch (LHB) coaches to be exported by the railways, said a senior official of Indian railway ministry. The export order of 120 LHB coaches include 17 air conditioned first class, 17 AC chair cars, 34 non-AC chair cars with pantry, 33 non-AC chair cars with prayer room and 19 power car coaches. The manufacturing of stainless steel LHB broad gauge coaches for Bangladesh Railway is in progress at the Rail Coach Factory (RCF) in Kapurthala in northern Indian state of Punjab.

India and Bangladesh hold the 62nd meeting of the joint committee on sharing of Ganges water at Farakka²⁸

A leading Indian negotiator of the trans-boundary rivers C. Lal said on February 12 that they would promptly respond to the signing of the much-awaited Teesta water-sharing agreement whenever Bangladesh proposes it to them. Lal was leading a five-member delegation at the 62nd meeting of the Joint Committee on sharing of Ganges water at Farakka. Only Bangladesh could tell when the issue should be discussed because they would propose it, said Lal, also the co-chairman of joint committee. Mofazzal Hossain, led a five-member Bangladesh delegation at the Ganges meeting.

Bangladesh foreign secretary summons Pakistani envoy²⁷

Acting Foreign Secretary Rear Admiral (Retd) Khurshed Alam summoned Pakistani envoy Shuja Alam and handed over a strongly worded note in Dhaka on February 2, a day after a staff member of Bangladesh High Commission in Islamabad, Jahangir Hossain, personal officer at the press wing of the Bangladesh High Commission, went missing for seven hours.

Pakistan summons Bangladesh envoy²⁸

Amid a diplomatic tension between Dhaka and Islamabad, Pakistan authorities summoned Bangladesh High Commissioner in Islamabad Suhrab Hossain on February 8. Diplomatic sources in Dhaka see Pakistan's move as an act of retaliation following Dhaka's summoning of Pakistan High Commissioner Shuja Alam on February 2. "Dhaka had a specific reason for summoning the Pakistan envoy and handing him over a protest note as Pakistan violated diplomatic norms by picking up the Bangladesh High Commission official on February 1 and detaining him without any reason," said a senior official at the foreign ministry. Though the Pakistani plainclothes men picked up Jahangir and harassed him, they did not reveal their identities, which the diplomatic circles termed "dangerous, alarming and a matter of grave concern." The plainclothes men had also blindfolded him. Later, they dropped him off at an unknown place after midnight and returned his ID card, cell phone, and motorbike. Earlier on the same day, detectives in Dhaka detained Pakistan High Commission staff Abrar Ahmed Khan for his "suspicious movement".

Bangladesh, US to curb terrorism²⁹

Bangladesh Police and the United States will work together to curb terrorism through sharing intelligence, technology and training, says a press release of Bangladesh Police. Inspector General of Police AKM Shahidul Hoque and US Ambassador to Bangladesh Marcia Stephens Bloom Bernicat expressed their respective opinions in this regard during a courtesy meeting at Police Headquarters on February 22, 2016.

Thailand keen to get its army trained by Bangladesh³⁰

Thailand expressed interest in training its army officers in the Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operation Training (Bipsot) before deploying them to UN peacekeeping missions. During a call on by Bangladesh Ambassador Saida Muna Tasneem on February 15, Royal Thai Army Commander-in-Chief General Teerachai Nakwanich conveyed the interest and praised Bangladeshi peacekeepers' professionalism and leadership in UN operations. Tasneem invited the army chief to visit Bangladesh later this year and senior and mid-ranking army officers to take up courses offered by National Defence College, and the Defence Services Command and Staff College. She also urged providing short term professional training and post-graduate courses to Army Medical Corps personnel in Thai universities. The duo discussed on holding an annual staff level consultation between the armies and periodic joint exercises of special and counterterrorism forces.

A delegation from the Ministry of Public Health of Thailand visits Bangladesh³¹

A 10-member delegation from the Ministry of Public Health of Thailand came to Dhaka on February 10, 2016 to join the first meeting of Bangladesh-Thailand Joint Working Group (JWG) on health services held on February 11, 2016. The delegation was led by Jiroth Sindhvananda, senior advisor of International Medicine of the Ministry of Public Health of Thailand. Biman Kumar Saha, additional secretary to the ministry of health and family welfare, led the Bangladesh delegation. The meeting came as preparatory to the proposed 4th meeting of the Bangladesh-Thailand Joint Trade Committee to be held in Dhaka in the second half of this year.

British Immigration Minister at the Home Office visits Bangladesh³²

The United Kingdom (UK) will work closely with Bangladesh to address shared issues and threats, including tackling illegal migration and organised crime, countering the risk of terrorism and improving aviation security. British Immigration Minister at the Home Office James Brokenshire said this before leaving Bangladesh following a 24-hour visit on February 15, 2016.

European Parliament delegation visits Bangladesh³³

A four-member European Parliament (EP) delegation led by Jean Lambert (Green Party-UK), came to Dhaka on February 10 to witness the state of political rights, freedom of expression, labour rights and the overall human rights situation in Bangladesh. Reportedly, the aim of the visit was to convey the Bangladeshi leadership and interlocutors, the EP's priorities on democracy and human rights in Bangladesh.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas makes stopover in Dhaka³⁴

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas made a nearly two-hour stopover at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka on February 14 while continuing his tour of three other Asian countries, including Japan. Bangladesh Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali welcomed Abbas at the VVIP terminal. They had a meeting in the airport lounge later where they exchanged views on different bilateral and regional issues of mutual interest. Abbas briefed Ali on the updates on the Israeli atrocities against Palestinian people and land as well as the longstanding impasse regarding the peace process. In response, the Bangladesh foreign minister reaffirmed the unwavering commitment of Bangladesh to the Palestinian people for their struggle for an independent homeland. President Abbas expressed sincere thanks for offering opportunities of higher studies for a good number of students as well as training of armed forces members of Palestine in Bangladesh. The Palestinian president was accompanied, among others, by his country's Foreign Minister Reyad Al Malki, President's Spokesman Nahel Abu Rodani, Diplomatic Adviser Majdi Al Khaldi and Economic Adviser Mustafa Abu Al-Rub. From the Bangladesh side, State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Nasrul Hamid and senior officials from the foreign ministry were present.

Bangladesh, Sweden sign cooperation deal³⁵

Bangladesh and Sweden signed a cooperation agreement on poverty alleviation, strengthening democracy, human rights, gender equality, and sustainable development on February 23, 2016. Swedish Ambassador to Bangladesh Johan Frisell and Senior Secretary of Economic Relations Division (ERD) Mohammad Mejbahuddin signed the agreement in the capital on behalf of their respective governments. The cooperation agreement is constituted on the basis of the Swedish government's newly adopted Results Strategy for Sweden International Development Corporation with Bangladesh. The Swedish development cooperation, which has been supporting Bangladesh since the latter's independence in 1971, is expected to disburse around \$26 million in this year for various development programmes in Bangladesh.

UN wants Bangladesh on high-level panel on water³⁶

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon phoned Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on February 7 and offered Bangladesh membership in a UN high-level panel on water, which is to be formed. Hasina readily accepted it.

Prime Minister Hasina addresses South Asian speakers' summit on achieving the SDGs³⁷

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina urged the speakers and parliamentarians of South Asia for allocating budgets to enable the countries for the full implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). "As a key institution of democracy, parliaments have an important role to play in making the SDGs a success. Practical steps need to be taken to advance the integration of the goals at the national level and monitor progress," Hasina said in her address in the closing session of the first-ever South Asian speakers' summit on achieving the SDGs at a city hotel in Dhaka on January 31.

Bangladesh expresses concerns over recent rocket launch by North Korea³⁸

Dhaka has expressed deep concern about the recent rocket launch by North Korea and urged the country to refrain from any action that might escalate the tension on the Korean Peninsula. In a statement on February 10, the foreign ministry said that this was a clear violation of the relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Forex reserve touches record \$28 billion³⁹

Bangladesh's foreign currency reserve crossed a record \$ 28 billion on February 25, 2016. According to Kazi Sayedur Rahman, General Manager Forex Reserve and Treasury Management Department of the Bangladesh Bank said, "it is attributed to falling commodity prices, a rise in export and inflowing remittances." "Declining import bills for petroleum oil and food grain also fuelled the reserve," he said. The reserve of \$28 billion is enough to meet the country's import bills for eight months, according to the central bank.

AIIB bill passed in parliament⁴⁰

Parliament approves a bill titled "Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank Bill, 2016" on February 23, 2016, paving the way for Bangladesh to join the AIIB as a founding member. State Minister for Finance and Planning M.A. Mannan placed the bill with Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury in the chair. The bill approved by the cabinet on December 29, 2015 was passed in voice vote. A number of lawmakers, including Fakhrul Islam of Jatiya Party, opposed the bill saying that World Bank (WB) or Asian Development Bank (ADB) may get disappointed if Bangladesh joins the China-based AIIB. In response, the state minister said joining AIIB does not mean that Bangladesh is leaving WB or ADB or any other international donor agencies.

Bangladesh Government to support SAARC satellite⁴¹

The government of Bangladesh will support India's move to launch a 'SAARC Satellite' provided that it would not affect the business and operational frequency of Bangabandhu satellite. From the onset, Bangladesh was with this initiative, but the local authority has some concerns, said Tarana Halim, State Minister For Telecom, before leaving for Barcelona to attend the World Mobile Congress. To resolve the confusion, a specialised committee was formed, which has already given the green light. The committee held several meetings with experts on the possibility of overlapping frequencies between the two satellites, and came to the decision. The telecom division has forwarded the proposal to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for the final approval.

Bhutan

New Indian Ambassador presents credentials⁴²

India's new ambassador to Bhutan, Jaideep Sarkar, presented his credentials to His Majesty The King, on February 2, 2016. Ambassador Jaideep Sarkar is India's 17th ambassador to Bhutan. Later in the day, the ambassador called on Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay and Foreign Minister Damcho Dorji. According to a government press release, Lyonchoen Tshering Tobgay and the ambassador agreed that both countries share a deep relationship that is not confined by political boundaries but nurtured and strengthened over the decades by the people of the Bhutan and India. Lyonchoen and Ambassador Sarkar also discussed promoting and exploring different pathways of cooperation to accommodate newer areas of mutual economic interests. Appreciation was also expressed for India's assistance in bringing about socio-economic developments in the country. Lyonchoen also said that the friendship between Bhutan and India, instituted by the respective leaders has grown stronger since the inception of the first Five Year Plan.

Six Ambassadors present credentials⁴³

Ambassadors from six countries presented their credentials to His Majesty The King at the Throne Room of the Tashichhodzong on February 29. The Ambassadors are: Ahn Seong-doo, Ambassador of the Republic of Korea to Bhutan, U Aung Khin Soe, Ambassador of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to Bhutan, Gonchig Ganbold, Ambassador of the Mongolian People's Republic to Bhutan, Nils Ragnar Kamsvag, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Norway to Bhutan, Vladimir Maric, Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia to Bhutan, and Jozef Drogenik, Ambassador of the Republic of Slovenia to Bhutan.

Japanese ambassador meets foreign minister and foreign secretary of Bhutan⁴⁴

Kenji Hiramatsu, Japanese Ambassador to Bhutan called on Foreign Minister of Bhutan Damcho Dorji and Foreign Secretary Tshering Dorji, on 3 February 2016.

24 Bhutanese to undergo vocational training in Hyderabad⁴⁵

As part of the ambassador's scholarship programme, 24 Bhutanese youth and in-service plumbers and electricians will undergo vocational trainings in National Academy of Construction in Hyderabad, India. Of them, 14 will be trained as electricians and 10 as plumbers for four months. The government of India will also bear the travel expenses of the trainees. "If the programme becomes successful, we will have such programmes in the future as well," Indian ambassador Jaideep Sarkar said, speaking to the trainees. The ambassador said the vocational trainings were relevant as Bhutan was undertaking large economic activities such as hydropower and construction projects.

Nehru-Wangchuck scholarship programme from the government of India⁴⁶

The Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) received a sum of Nu 15.5 million for the Nehru-Wangchuck scholarship programme from the government of India. The cheque was handed over by the Indian Ambassador Jaideep Sarkar to RCSC Chairperson Dasho Karma Tshiteem at the commission's office in Thimphu on February 19, 2016. The Indian ambassador said the scholarship programme is a prestigious one and demonstrates the special relationship between the two countries. He said Bhutan's best and the brightest are provided with opportunity to study in premier Indian institutes.

Government of India approves widening of Chuzom-Haa highway.⁴⁷

The government of India has approved the widening of the Chuzom-Haa highway, at a cost of Nu 2.6 billion. Work is scheduled to begin soon and the widening of the highway is expected to be completed by June 2018. After months of sustained efforts and the perseverance of Brigadier PKG Mishra, the Chief Engineer for DANTAK, the Indian government has sanctioned the up-gradation of the Chuzom-Haa road, according to a press release issued by DANTAK. Chief Engineer, Brigadier PKG Mishra said the project will ensure comprehensive development of the Haa region. He added the improvement of the Chuzom-Haa road is a key part of DANTAK's road upgradation plan and will bring major economic development and positive changes to the country. The project is expected to have a significant socio-economic impact especially by allowing enhancing the link between agriculture produce and markets. The double laning of the Chuzom-Haa highway, along with the construction of the Damchu-Haa link road will reduce the distance between Phuentsholing and Haa by approximately 45km and travel time by more than two hours. DANTAK plans to execute 50.9km of the Chuzom-Haa road in three stretches with minimum disruption to the environment. The link road from Damchu will connect with the Chuzom-Haa highway at a point called KM 28 from where the upgradation work will commence. The work on the first stretch (from the Haa side) from KM 79 to KM 58 will commence in next financial year and the remaining two stretches: KM 58 to KM 24 and KM 24 to KM 28 will start subsequently. The construction of road would eventually will allow an unimpeded

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drive from Phuentsholing through the Damchu-Chukha realignment, potentially all the way to Haa valley.

Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon visits the UAE⁴⁸

Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon made a 2-day official visit to United Arab Emirates (UAE) on February 27 on the invitation by the country's Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Dunya Maumoon met with Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and handed over a letter from President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom to Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayeh Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Abu Dhabi. Discussions between the two ministers focused on ways to further strengthen the close bilateral ties between the two countries especially in areas of trade and investment. Minister Dunya was accompanied by Abdullah Hameed, Non-Resident Ambassador of Maldives to UAE and Maryam Bassama Farooq, Assistant Director at Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During the visit, Minister Dunya met with the Maldivians in a special reception hosted in UAE for them.

Former President Nasheed meets with secretary general of Common Wealth⁴⁹

Former President Mohamed Nasheed, who is currently in the UK for a spine surgery, met with the Secretary General of the Common Wealth, Kamlesh Sharma. Former First Lady Laila Ali and the MDP Chairperson Ali Waheed joined the former President at the meeting. President Nasheed announced the meeting on his official Twitter account.

A high-level Maldivian delegation visits Colombo and Singapore⁵⁰

A high-level Maldivian delegation comprised of Minister for Legal Affairs at the President's Office, Uza Aishath Azima Shakoor, Minister of Environment and Energy, Thoriq Ibrahim, Minister of Tourism, Moosa Zameer and Under Secretary at Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr. Ali Naseer Mohamed visited Sri Lanka and Singapore From January 28 to February 1, 2016 to brief the local and International media operating in Colombo and Singapore about the current issues in the Maldives. The Maldivian delegation also met and briefed the High Commissioner of the United Kingdom, the Ambassador of Germany and Charge d'affaires of America in Colombo on the recent developments in the country.

CMAG delegation visits the Maldives⁵¹

Delegates from Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) left Maldives on February 8 after concluding their one-day visit to Maldives to assess the current situation in the country. Maldivian Foreign Ministry said that delegates from CMAG – who visited Maldives upon invitation of Maldivian government – had constructive discussions with high-ranking government officials and other relevant authorities – including President Abdulla Yameen and Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon. The delegation was led by CMAG Vice-Chair Carl Greenidge and Vice President and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Guyana, Carolyn Rodrigues Birkett; and includes Cabinet Secretary for Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Kenya, Dr. Amina Mohamed, and Foreign Secretary of India Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar.

High-level Maldivian delegates meet Commonwealth secretary-general⁵²

A high-level Maldivian delegation led by Maldivian Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon met with Secretary-General of Commonwealth, Kamallesh Sharma on February 11. The other members of the delegation were Fisheries and Agriculture Minister Dr. Mohamed Shainee, Attorney-General and Acting Minister of Law and Gender Mohamed Anil, and Chief Communications Officer at President's Office Ali Khalid. Foreign Ministry said that current political situation in Maldives, including permission given to former Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed to travel to UK for medical care was discussed during the meeting. Foreign Ministry said in their press statement that both Sharma and Maldivian delegates agreed that the visit by the team from CMAG "reaffirmed the value of close partnership and collaboration between Commonwealth Secretariat and member states.

CMAG suggests six things to the Maldives along with freeing political prisoners⁵³

Instead making a definitive action against the Maldives, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) has proposed six things for the Maldives at the Extraordinary Meeting by the CMAG held on February 24. A statement issued by the Commonwealth regarding the meeting said that CMAG believes it is important to oversee if the country is continuing to do the listed actions. And so the CMAG proposed an all-party talk initiated by the Government and granting freedom all the political prisoners in the country. It also includes taking steps to improve the judicial system and bring a halt to the terrorism charges to suppress the political debate. In the meeting, Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon extended the invitation to the Commonwealth to appoint a Special Envoy for the Maldives to help the country in accelerating its democratisation process. The Foreign Ministry reports that Minister Dunya and Attorney General Mohamed Anil also briefed the CMAG about the Government's on-going collaboration with the UN and the European Union in further strengthening the justice sector in the meeting.

Foreign Minister attends the Chinese New Year celebration in Male⁵⁴

Foreign Minister, Dunya Maumoon attended a function to celebrate the Chinese New Year at Hotel Jen on February 1, 2016. Speaking at the function, Minister Dunya said that the Maldives is a good destination for investors. Minister Dunya said that the Maldives has policies that assure guarantees to investors and foreign partners. She said that those policies empower the country's sustainability at the international community. The Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives, Wang Fukang also spoke at the ceremony saying that the interactions between the people of China and the Maldives are increasing and is enriching the relationship between the two countries.

German ambassador meets with the controller general of immigration⁵⁵

German Ambassador to the Maldives and Sri Lanka, Dr. Jürgen Morhard has met with the Controller General of Immigration, Mohamed Anwar on February 11, 2016. The topics of discussion at the meeting were strengthening the relationship between the two countries and easing the German VISA process to Maldivians.

European Parliamentary delegation visits Maldives⁵⁶

A delegation from European Parliament arrived in Maldives on February 7 upon invitation of Maldivian Government. The delegation said that they were hopeful that Maldives would resolve issues and develop democratic values so that sanctions against the country would not be necessary. Speaking during a press conference held at Hotel Jen on February 9, British representative for European Parliament Richard Cobbett said that they did not want to have to press sanctions against Maldives. Cobbett said that the purpose of the European Parliament delegation's visit to Maldives was to prove that they wanted to hear everyone's voices and open a genuine dialogue with everyone in order to develop democratic values in the country. The delegation said that all political parties and government officials had been open for discussion. The delegates met with President Abdulla Yameen, Foreign Minister Dhunya Maumoon and Environment Minister Thoriq Ibrahim, as well as all political parties and civil societies in the country.

British-Maldives APPG delegates visit Maldives⁵⁷

Delegates from British-Maldives All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) arrived in Maldives on February 14. Spokesperson of the President's Office, Ibrahim Muaz Ali said that the British-Maldives All Party Parliamentary Group believes that economic agenda by the President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom is a good and effective agenda. Muaz Ali tweeted a quote from MP Sir David Amess, leader of the delegation, which say that the British-Maldives APPG agrees that President Yameen's economic agenda is effective. Reportedly, Sir David Amess said that travel bans to the Maldives is not necessary. Sir David Amess said that the APPG has also met with the Economic Minister and the Tourism Minister and the Maldives is not perceived well in the international community. The British MP said that sanctions against a country that is dependent on the tourism, like the Maldives, would only lead to the suffering of the people. Sir David Amess also visited the Maafushi Prison where the former President Mohamed Nasheed was staying.

Maldivian chief of defense force meets Indian Navy chief⁵⁸

Chief of Defense Force of Maldives, Major General Ahmed Shiyam, made an official visit to India, and met with Chief of Naval Staff of India Admiral Robin Kumar Dhowan. During the meeting held at Visakhapatnam Eastern Naval Command on February 7, the two officers talked about the strong diplomatic ties between the two countries, and discussed ways to improve military ties. Shiyam noted the huge help provided by Indian Government in training Maldivian officers, and thanked the Indian government for it. Shiyam was in India to join the biggest fleet review in history of Indian Navy from February 4-8, 2016.

United Nations assistant secretary-general for political affairs visits Maldives⁵⁹

United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Miroslav Jenca made an official visit to the Maldives from February 20 to February 22, 2016 upon invitation of Maldivian Government. During the visit, he met high-ranking government officials including President Abdulla Yameen and Foreign Minister

Dunya Maumoon. At their meeting at the President's Office on February 21, Miroslav Jenca and President Yameen discussed the political state of the Maldives.

Imran's sentencing represents a backward step: Hugo Swire⁶⁰

Imran was sentenced to 12 years in prison on February 16 for terrorism. The charge against him was that he had incited violence during the speech he gave in opposition protest on May 1, 2015. British Minister for Asia, Hugo Swire has said that the conviction of Adhaalath Party leader Abdulla Imran represented a backward step in Maldivian Government living up to its international human rights commitments. Swire released a press statement on February 17 saying that Imran was the second opposition political leader to be convicted on terrorism charges during the span of a year, and that it raised worrying questions regarding freedom of speech, rule of law, and Maldivian government's commitment to democracy.⁷³

INS Vikramaditya visits Maldives⁶¹

Indian Navy's largest aircraft carrier – INS Vikramaditya – made a four day trip to Maldives on its second trip outside India on February 15. The 258 meter long, 60 meter wide INS Vikramaditya made its maiden trip out of India to Sri Lanka. Commenting on the visit to the Maldives, Second Commander of INS Vikramaditya, Janath Dhevli said that the purpose of the visit was to strengthen the ties between India and Maldives in the field of defence and security. INS Vikramaditya was also joined by INS Maisoor and INS Deepak in the trip.

India 'Health Expo 2016' begins⁶²

India 'Health Expo 2016', the biggest event planned during India-Maldives Health and Wellness Week, began at Dharubaaruge on February 12, 2016. The event was inaugurated by Maldivian Health Minister Iruthisham Adam and Indian High Commissioner to Maldives Akilesh Mishra. During the inauguration ceremony, Minister Iruthisham noted the assistance provided by India to develop and improve Maldivian health sector, and expressed gratitude for the assistance. She said that Indian government suggestion to hold the Expo in Maldives was perfect as it coincided with a time when Maldivian government was planning and executing projects to develop Maldivian health sector. Ambassador Mishra said that health sector was the focal point of the close relationship between India and Maldives, and that Indian government was dedicated to remain steadfast in providing assistance to Maldives in that area. Over 20 specialists from 18 Indian hospitals – including Apollo Hospital, NU Hospital, KIMS Hospital, Colombia Asia and Basavantharam India American Cancer Hospital - participated in the event. Other events planned for India-Maldives Health and Wellness Week include a medical camp at Indhira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH) from February 14-18, and India-Maldives Health Partnership Dialogue.

Japan opens embassy in Maldives⁶³

Though the Japanese embassy has been in use since start of 2016, the embassy was officially opened on February 8. Japanese embassy was officially opened in a ceremony participated by Japanese Parliamentary Vice-Minister Masakazu

Hamachi, Japanese Ambassador for Sri Lanka and Maldives Kenichi Suganuma and Maldivian Foreign Secretary Dr. Ali Naseer. Japanese Government has said that opening an embassy in Maldives would strengthen ties between the two countries. Diplomatic ties between Japan and Maldives was built on 1967. Japanese Government has said that opening the embassy would make the celebration of 50 years of diplomatic ties between the two countries in 2017 all the more colourful.

President Yameen establishes national counter terrorism centre⁶⁴

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom has established the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) in order to combat the growing threat of radicalisation and extremism in the Maldives. The NCTC has been mandated to act as the national focal point on all counter-terrorism and anti-terrorism efforts. The centre will formulate counter-terrorism and anti-terrorism guidelines and procedures based on the analysis of international benchmarks and best practices. NCTC is set to gather and analyse intelligence, from all state agencies, on terrorism activities and inform relevant state authorities. It will also seek to identify radicalised elements within the communities and run targeted rehabilitation programs to those in need. The Centre will coordinate with the relevant state agencies and social NGO's in eradicating the threat of terrorism and radicalism in the country.

Nepal

Madhesi morcha puts off protest programmes⁶⁵

The Samyukta Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha (SLMM) called off their programmes of strike, border blockade and protest. A meeting of the SLMM in Kathmandu on February 8 decided to postpone the protest programmes in view of what it called "citizen's suggestion". Frustrated by the prolonged protests, local residents and businessmen on February 5 forcefully opened the Birgunj-Raxaul border, allowing cargo trucks and vehicles to cross freely into Nepal from neighbouring India. "Considering the current crisis facing the nation and the public necessity and aspirations, the ongoing protest programmes of general strike, border blockade, government office shutdown have been called for now. But the other agitation programmes will continue," read a statement issued after the meeting. Meanwhile, the SLMM has raised objection to what it called the government's premeditated attempt to spread false message that the agitating forces were defeated. The Morcha is determined that it will not back down from its struggle under no circumstances.

Finance Minister Bishnu Poudel visits India⁶⁶

Finance Minister of Nepal Bishnu Poudel made a visit to New Delhi on February 7, 2016 to lay groundwork for the visit of Prime Minister KP Oli. During the visit, he met with External Affairs Minister of India Sushma Swaraj, his Indian counterpart Arun Jaitley, Home Minister Rajnath Singh and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval among many other leaders.

Prime Minister Oli visits India⁶⁷

Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli led a 46-member delegation on a six-day official visit to India on February 19, 2016. This was the maiden foreign visit of Prime Minister Oli after taking office in October 2015. Prime Minister Oli was received at

the Indira Gandhi International Airport by India's Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj. Also present to welcome the PM and his entourage was Nepali Ambassador to India Deep Kumar Upadhyay, Indian Ambassador to Nepal Ranjit Rae, Migrants' Nepali Association Chair Loknath Bhandari, officials at the Nepali Embassy in New Delhi and senior officers of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. Prime Minister K.P. Oli was welcomed with 'guard of honour' at Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on February 20, 2016. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was present at the event. Later the two prime ministers had bilateral meeting at the Hyderabad house. During the meet, both the prime ministers forged agreements on seven different issues. India has agreed to allow Nepal to use Banglabandha and Visakhapatnam ports. Nepal has been allowed to use Rohanpur-Singhabad Railway route to access the Visakhapatnam port. Likewise, agreements have been forged on post-quake reconstruction assistance and construction of postal highway. Also, the two Prime Ministers have jointly inaugurated Dhalkebar-Muzaffarpur cross-country transmission line. An additional 80 megawatt of electricity procured from India has officially been transmitted to Nepal via this transmission line. Both the prime ministers jointly switched on the transmission through remote controller. Indian Minister for Home Affairs Rajnath Singh and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, separately called on Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli at the residence of Indian President, on February 20. Issues related to bilateral ties, mutual benefits and different sectors of cooperation were discussed in the meeting. Indian State Minister for Power, Piyush Goyal, State Minister for Ayush, Shreepad Yesso Naik and National Security Adviser to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi Ajit Doval separately met Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli at the residence of the Indian President on February 22, 2016. During the visit, Oli delivered the 21st Sapru House Lecture at the ICWA. Prime Minister K.P. Oli, went to Bhuj in Gujarat state on February 23 to take stock of the post earthquake reconstruction works in Bhuj after it was devastated by a deadly quake in 2001. From Gujarat, he flew to Mumbai and met top business leaders. He returned back to Nepal on February 24, 2016.

Chief of Army Staff Chettri visits India⁶⁸

Chief of Army Staff Gen Rajendra Chhetri, who made a week-long visit to India, met with high-level political figures and army officials. On February 2, he held meetings with Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh and Minister for Defence Manohar Parrikar, along with his Indian counterpart Chief of Army Staff Gen. Dalbir Singh. He also held bilateral talks during separate meetings with Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Robin K. Dhowan, Chief of Staff Committee General Bikram Singh, Chief of the Air Staff Arup Raha and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. As per the tradition of conferring honorary titles to each other's Army chiefs between two nations, Indian President Pranab Mukherjee decorated Chhetri at the President's Office on February 3, 2016.

Nepal requests Bangladesh to hold postponed meeting⁶⁹

Nepal has requested Bangladesh to hold the commerce secretary-level meeting, which was postponed after Nepal notified the Bangladeshi side about its inability to manage time due to ongoing crises. The meeting originally scheduled for mid-October 2015 in Dhaka. The two sides are expected to sign an agreement on

providing easier market access to each other's products and remove barriers to trade. As per an understanding reached earlier, Bangladesh will provide duty-free access to 108 Nepali products—most of which are agriculture-related—while Nepal will provide preferential treatment to 50 Bangladeshi goods. Commerce Secretary Naindra Upadhyaya said the request was made in the last week of January after the conclusion of the Bangladesh Trade Fair in Kathmandu in third week of January. "We have not received a feedback so far," he added.

Naya Shakti unveils party principles⁷⁰

The Naya Shakti campaign led by former Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai on February 7 issued broad policy principles that would guide party's policy development. The first principle revolves around protection and promotion of Swadhinta (independence), sovereignty and territorial integrity. Naya Shakti has also announced that it would formulate timely national security and foreign policy, maintaining cordial relations with India and China as part of its second broad policy commitment. The new political party has suggested steps to decrease dependence through national unity, economic prosperity and economic prosperity in what it called a 'progressive nationalism'. The second commitment of party is to work for equitable prosperity of the country and transform the country. The third one concerns about inclusive, proportional and participatory democracy, which the party aims to adopt by ending the current 'formal and ritual' democracy. Calling for a change in the existing electoral system of the country, the Bhattarai-led force has proposed a directly-elected presidential system as form of government. Good governance is another of Naya Shakti's commitment, which leaders of the force say, makes it stand out from other 'traditional parties'. The party has also made a pitch for advanced socialism, which the party says it necessary given that the Nepali society has entered into capitalism from authoritarian and unitary state. The Naya Shakti has said that problems facing the country, particularly in the Tarai, should be resolved without any delay.

President of the NC and former PM Sushil Koirala expires⁷¹

President of the Nepali Congress (NC) and former Prime Minister Sushil Koirala passed away on February 9, 2016 at the age of 78 at his Maharajgunj residence succumbing to pneumonia. World leaders including Indian President Pranab Mukherjee, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other Indian leaders expressed their heartfelt condolence on the demise of former prime minister. External Affairs Minister of India Sushma Swaraj and member of all-party delegation from India went to Nepal to offer their final tributes to Sushil Koirala.

Indian delegation meets president and prime minister of Nepal⁷²

External Affairs Minister of India Sushma Swaraj and member of all-party delegation who went to Nepal to offer their final tributes to former prime minister and NC President Sushil Koirala, paid courtesy calls on President Bidhya Devi Bhandari in Kathmandu on February 9. During the meeting, President Bhandari told the Indian leaders that Nepal-India relationship is very deep and intimate and transcends politics. The Indian delegation, also met with Prime Minister K.P.

Oli. Swaraj informed Prime Minister Oli that the Indian government had called an emergency meeting which decided to dispatch an all party delegation to Kathmandu to pay respect to Koirala. Prime Minister Oli told the Indian delegation that their presence in the hour of grief demonstrated that India was Nepal's friend.

Japan extends Rs 3.5 billion grant for earthquake recovery projects⁷³

The Government of Japan has agreed to provide grant assistance of JPY 4 billion to Nepal for "the Project on rehabilitation and recovery from Nepal earthquake." This agreement to this effect was signed on February 17, 2016 in response to the exchange of notes of grant assistance by Nepali government and Japanese government on December 21, 2015, according to a statement issued by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Nepal Office. At a function held at the Ministry of Finance in Singha Durbar, Kathmandu, agreements of the projects were signed and exchanged between Joint Secretary at Ministry of Finance Baikuntha Aryal and Chief Representative of JICA Nepal, Tsutomu Shimizu, on behalf of JICA. The grant assistance will be used for the reconstruction of Paropakar Maternity and Women's Hospital, Bir Hospital, rehabilitation of Water Transmission System in Chautara and bridge construction along Barhakilo-Barpak road.

Inflation hits 7-year high of 12.1 per cent⁷⁴

As a result of Tarai strikes and disruption of trade routes, inflation rate reached nearly seven year high of 12.1 per cent in mid-January, Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) said on February 21. This is the first time the rate has crossed 12 per cent since mid-June 2009. Nara Bahadur Thapa, chief of NRB's research department, said the supply disruption created a gap between demand and supply, resulting in price hikes. The four-and-half-month blockade not only disrupted imports, but also the delivery of goods within the country due to fuel shortages. Most of the food items witnessed double-digit price rise in mid-January, with the prices of pulses and cooking oil skyrocketing by 46.9 per cent and 31.3 per cent, respectively. Thapa said the blockade was not the only factor pushing up the prices of pulses. "It was also due to the rise in the prices in the Indian market due to a fall in the production there."

Nepali garments get duty-free status in the US⁷⁵

Nepali readymade garment has officially received duty-free facility in the US market, with the US President Barack Obama signing legislation authorising special trade preferences for Nepal on February 24, 2016. The special trade preference now allows duty-free tariff benefits for up to 66 types of garment items including certain carpets, headgears, shawls, scarves and travel goods. The authorisation of Nepal Programme has addressed the demand of Nepali garment manufacturers who had been lobbying for duty-free entry for Nepali products for over a decade. According to the US government, the Nepal programme is authorised for 10 years and designed to help Nepal's economic recovery from the April and May earthquakes. For Nepali garment industry, the US is the major market. In 2000-01, Nepal's garment exports reached an all-time high of Rs13.12 billion, with exports to the US accounting for 86.49 per cent. However, Nepal's garment industry witnessed a prolonged slump after the US scrapped the quota system in 2005 as

per the agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) of the WTO. The garment exports slumped to Rs5.28 billion in 2014-15 and number of garment industries came down to around 50 from over 400 in 2000-01.

President authenticates first amendment bill of constitution⁷⁶

President Bidya Devi Bhandari on February 28 authenticated Nepal's constitution (first amendment) bill-2072 BS'. The Legislature-Parliament had endorsed the bill on January 23, 2016. It was then sent to the President for the authentication. Sushil Kiorala led-government had registered the bill at the House for the amendment as per the consensus reached among three major political parties in course of addressing the Madhes agitation. The bill was approved after having clause-wise discussion on it. The bill amended three Articles -42, 84 and 286 of the constitution.

Nepal, China agree on security matters⁷⁷

Ahead of Prime Minister K.P. Oli's visit to China, Nepal on February 28, 2016 agreed with its northern neighbour to strengthen the cooperation on various issues relating to security. During a meeting, the Nepali side led by Jhabindra Aryal, joint secretary and head of the North Asia Division at the Foreign Ministry and the Chinese side under Liu Guangyuan, director general of External Security Affairs of the Chinese Ministry of External Affairs held discussions on a wide range of security cooperation between the two countries. The Chinese side urged the Nepali officials to be more alert not to allow any anti-China activities in March. "We have assured them that Nepal adheres the one-China policy and strictly maintains that Nepali soil will not be used against its neighbour," said Aryal.

At least 4,000 security personnel drawn back⁷⁸

As the security situation in Tarai improves following the end of border blockade and general strike, security forces are scaling back thousands of additional personnel deployed in the plains during the height of the unrest. At least 4,000 police officials, who were part of the surge to contain violent protests in the region in the run-up to the promulgation of the constitution in September, have been sent back to their respective duty stations as protests fizzled out, according to Nepal Police and the Armed Police Force.

IOC assures regular LPG supply to Nepal⁷⁹

Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) has said its sole supplier Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) has assured regular supply of cooking gas from February 29, 2016. IOC has reduced the supply for the past week, citing technical problem at its Barauni-based depot. "IOC officials have said the problem has been fixed and that regular supply will resume from Monday (February 29)," said NOC Director Mukunda Ghimire. IOC's Barauni depot supplies almost half (49 per cent) of the country's demand for cooking gas. Of the total demand of 29,000 tonnes per month, the depot supplies 13,000 tonnes. IOC's Haldiya depot supplies 11,000 tonnes, while the rest 5,000 tonnes are supplied by Mathura depot. After India lifted the trade embargo in the first week of February, the supply of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) had improved. IOC had been supplying up to 55 bullets a day from 15-20

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bullets during the blockade. But the supply again dropped to 20 bullets a day (12 bullets from Haldiya and eight from Mathura) after technical problem emerged at the Barauni depot, Ghimire said.

Pathankot attack: phone number traced to Jaish office, says Aziz⁸⁰

Adviser to Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz has revealed that one of the mobile phone numbers linked to those who attacked the Pathankot airbase had been traced to the Jaish-e-Mohammed group's headquarters in Bahawalpur. Aziz called the lodging of the FIR in connection with the Pathankot assault a "logical and positive step" in bringing the perpetrators to justice. JeM chief Masood Azhar has been named by India as the mastermind of the airbase attack and Aziz confirmed media reports that he (Azhar) had been under "protective custody" since Jan 14.

India halts 'Dosti' bus service amid protests⁸¹

The operation of the 'Dosti' bus has been suspended indefinitely at the request of Indian authorities. Retired Col. Khalid, the manager of Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation, Lahore, told reporters on Sunday that the service would be resumed after getting clearance from Indian officials who had expressed their inability to carry passengers to Delhi in the wake of caste-based protests in Haryana.

Trade only way to normalise ties: Indian High Commission⁸²

Indian High Commissioner Gautam Bambawale has said that the road to normalisation of Pakistan-India relations is only through trade and there is no better way of improving relations than mutually beneficial economic ties. Talking to the Senior Vice-President of Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Almas Hyder, and others in Lahore on February 17, he said the Indian government had recently introduced multiple-entry visas for three years exclusively for businessmen. This includes visit of 15 Indian cities exempted from police reporting. Moreover, businessmen can travel to India by road and return via air.

National Command Authority calls for strategic restraint pact in South Asia⁸³

The National Command Authority (NCA), the principal decision-making body on nuclear issues, at its meeting presided over by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on February 24, "took note of the growing conventional and strategic weapons' development in the region", according to a press statement issued by the ISPR. Besides expressing its resolve to do everything, short of entering an arms race, for keeping national security intact, the NCA "reemphasised Pakistan's desire for establishing the Strategic Restraint Regime in South Asia". The NCA was of the view that development of conventional and nuclear weapons by India had "adverse ramifications for peace and security" in the region. Pakistan has been concerned over India developing nuclear submarine INS Arihant and a number of other Arihant-class strategic submarines and nuclear-powered attack submarines. Reports about India building a secret Nuclear City in southern Karnataka state for producing thermonuclear weapons have also been seen as worrisome and so has been its expanding missile programme." The NCA reiterated its policy of maintaining Full Spectrum Deterrence for covering the entire spectrum of threat,

including Cold Start Doctrine and land-based standoff capability in Andaman and Nicobar Isles. One of the important agenda items was to prepare for the final edition of Nuclear Security Summit being in the United States. The NCA was briefed on the steps Pakistan had so far taken in the realm of nuclear security.

Eight F-16s will be sold to Pakistan, Congress told⁸⁴

The Obama administration notified the Congress on February 12 that it planned to sell eight F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan. The proposed deal will now go through a 30-day notification period after which it will be finalised. The US State Department informed Congress that it was committed to improving Pakistan's precision strike capability, which was seen as a veiled reference to F-16 fighter jets. State Department spokesman, Mark Toner, said earlier at a news briefing that US weapon sales to Pakistan contributed to the fight against terrorism and furthered America's foreign policy interests. The remarks followed a move by some US lawmakers and a campaign in the US media to stop the Obama administration from selling eight F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan.

Pakistani envoy summoned by Afghan ministry⁸⁵

Afghanistan's foreign ministry summoned Pakistan's ambassador Sayed Ibrar Hussain to express "serious concerns" over the kidnapping of an ex-Afghan governor in Islamabad on February 14, 2016. Sayed Fazlullah Wahidi was kidnapped on February 12, 2016. The Afghan foreign ministry expressed concern to Ambassador Hussain and urged Islamabad to throw all its resources into finding Wahidi, described as one of the "big personalities" of the war-torn country.

Pakistan launches \$500 million projects for Afghanistan: Ahsan Iqbal⁸⁶

Minister for Planning, Development and Reforms Ahsan Iqbal said that Pakistan had launched \$500 million worth of projects for Afghanistan's education, health and infrastructure sectors. He said that 3,000 scholarships had been offered to Afghan students in different universities of Pakistan and 100 Afghan students would study in the Lahore University of Management Sciences. Talking to an Afghan delegation comprising academicians, lawmakers, students and civil society members in Islamabad on February 11, Iqbal said that Islamabad had desired to forge friendly relations with all its neighbours, including Afghanistan.

Afghan ambassador meets Chief of Army Staff⁸⁷

New Afghan Ambassador Dr. Hazrat Omar Zakhilwal called on Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen Raheel Sharif in Rawalpindi on February 12, 2016. According to an ISPR press release, matters of mutual interest including measures to improve security along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border were discussed during the meeting.

Afghan army delegation in Quetta⁸⁸

A nine-member delegation of the Afghan National Army, headed by Corps Commander Lt. Gen. Muhammad Munin Faqir, visited the Southern Command headquarters in Quetta on February 17 and met its Commander, Lt. Gen. Aamir Riaz. Security arrangements on the Pak-Afghan border and other matters of mutual interest were discussed during the meeting. Both commanders agreed to enhance

coordination and security measures on their sides of the border. It had been decided during Chief of Army Staff Gen. Raheel Sharif's last visit to Afghanistan that corps commanders from both countries would hold meetings to ensure better border management.

Gen. Raheel Sharif discusses Afghan peace process with Gen. Campbell⁸⁹

Outgoing Commander of Resolute Support Mission and US Forces in Afghanistan, General John F. Campbell paid a farewell call to General Raheel Sharif, Chief of the Pakistani Armed Forces, at General Headquarter Rawalpindi on February 18. During the meeting, both dignitaries reviewed the ongoing Afghan reconciliation process and discussed the way forward. Gen. Sharif particularly thanked outgoing Commander Resolute Support Mission for his efforts towards stability in Afghanistan.

Pakistan lifts Iran sanctions, eyes \$5 billion trade⁹⁰

Pakistan officially lifted sanctions on Iran on February 19 and decided to revive economic and commercial relations with the neighbouring country. The decision was taken by an inter-ministerial meeting chaired by Finance Minister Ishaq Dar which discussed modalities for lifting the sanctions in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolution 2231. The finance ministry said in a statement that a notification regarding the decision had been issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It said that economic and commercial relations with Iran in various fields including trade, investment, technology, banking, finance and energy had been revived with immediate effect and all previous notifications with regard to UN sanctions on Iran stood repealed. The statement of the finance ministry said that Pakistan welcomed the Joint Comprehensive Pro-gramme of Action Iran had reached with the European Union, China, United States, Germany, France, United Kingdom and the Russian Federation. Because of the ban, Pakistan's exports to Iran fell to a mere \$43 million in 2014 from \$182 million in 2010. The two countries are now working on a strategy to increase bilateral trade to \$5 billion in five years.

15-year LNG import deal signed with Qatar⁹¹

Pakistan signed an agreement of billions of dollars with Qatar for importing liquefied natural gas (LNG) for 15 years on February 10, 2016. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani witnessed the signing of the agreement by Minister for Petroleum and Natural Resources Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and the Chairman of the Qatargas Board of Directors, Saad Sherida. Talking to reporters at the ceremony, Abbasi said that the LNG deal would be a game-changer for Pakistan. He said 3.75 million tons of LNG would be imported annually on a government-to-government basis, at comparative rates, which would meet close to 20 per cent energy requirements of Pakistan. Abbasi said the deal would help revive the non-functioning electricity generation units of 2,000 megawatts and three fertiliser plants, and also mitigate the hardship faced by domestic consumers and the compressed natural gas (CNG) sector. In addition to the long-term LNG sale and purchase agreement, memorandums of understanding on cooperation between the two countries in the fields of radio and television, health and academic research were signed. The MoU on cooperation in

broadcasting (radio and television) was signed by Prime Minister's Special Assistant on Foreign Affairs Syed Tariq Fatemi and Qatar's Foreign Minister Muhammad bin Abdurrehman Al Thani. Finance Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar signed the memorandum on cooperation in health sector with Qatar's Health Minister Hanan Muhammad Al Kuwari; and on academic research and cooperation by Pakistan's Ambassador Shahzad Ahmed and Qatar Armed Forces' Commander of Strategic Studies Maj. Gen. Saud Ali Al Naeemi. Earlier, Prime Minister Sharif was welcomed on arrival at Doha International Airport by his Qatari counterpart Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasir bin Khalifa Al Thani. The Emir welcomed the delegation at a ceremony held later at the Diwan-i-Emiri. They held a one-to-one meeting and exchanged views on regional and international issues of mutual interest. Delegation-level talks were also held, followed by the signing of the MoUs.

Pakistan on path to rapid economic growth: World Bank chief⁹²

World Bank President Jim Yong Kim made his maiden visit to Pakistan and met Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Finance Minister Ishaq Dar in separate meetings in Islamabad on February 9, 2016. Kim said that Pakistan is now on the path of increased economic growth and prosperity. He applauded the prudent economic policies of Pakistan government, saying that the country's economic outlook had become stable which was the result of the efforts of its financial team. At the meeting with the prime minister, the WB president talked about the importance of pressing forward with economic reforms. He recalled his meeting with Sharif two years ago in Washington and observed that the government had stabilised the economy over the three tough years. As part of the World Bank's continued support to the country, they discussed a development policy credit to promote economic reforms.

Dutch queen wraps up three-day visit⁹³

Queen Maxima of the Netherlands wound up her three-day visit to Pakistan after a meeting with President Mamnoon Hussain where she praised the \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, saying it would bring in prosperity to whole South Asian region. The UN Secretary General's Special Advocate for Inclusive Finance also praised Pakistan's efforts for promoting more financial inclusion saying it was one of only 25 countries focusing on this issue. A spokesperson for the Presidency said the queen also praised other projects and institutions, including the National Database and Registration Authority (Nadra) and the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP). Separately, speaking to a group of Pakistani and Dutch journalists, the Dutch royal said the launch of a national strategy on financial inclusion and the subsequent establishment of a council for the implementation of the strategy was a welcome effort on the part of Pakistan.

Pakistan calls on UN to guarantee right of self-determination to people under occupation⁹⁴

Pakistan has urged the United Nations to guarantee the right of self-determination to people living under foreign occupation if the principles of its Charter are to have meaning. "Unless the rule of international law is applied, people's expectations

of justice and fairness from the UN will remain unmet," Pakistan's UN Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi said during a debate in the Security Council on February 15 on UN Charter and Maintenance of Peace and Security. She regretted that the charter's principles were flouted in pursuit of narrow 'national interests' by the powerful. Lodhi stressed that failure to deter illegal use of force had created an impression that UN had become an instrument of the powerful, not guardian of international law tenets.

Foreign Office hails Russia-US agreement on Syria⁹⁵

Pakistan welcomed the agreement reached between Russia and the United States for cessation of hostilities in Syria. "Pakistan has always maintained a principled position on Syria based on neutrality, impartiality and respect of territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria. "We, however, remain concerned on the humanitarian crisis and the urgent need to address the refugee crisis," the Foreign Office said in a statement. Pakistan appreciated the efforts of the International Syria Support Group and sincerely wished for the success of the agreement, it added.

Understanding on deportation issue reached with EU⁹⁶

Pakistan and the European Union have agreed to sort out differences over the issue of readmission of illegal immigrants. In a statement issued on February 7, 2016, Minister for Interior Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan praised the EU for understanding Pakistan's concerns over implementation of the EU Readmission Agreement (Eura) suspended over three months ago. The broad-based understanding between the EU and Pakistan was reportedly reached at a recent meeting of the Joint Readmission Committee (JRC) in Brussels. The interior minister and the EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, Dimitris Avramopoulos, had decided in November last year to hold the JRC meeting. Chaudhry Nisar had shared Pakistan's serious concerns with Avramopoulos over the loopholes in implementation of Eura which, according to him, had seriously undermined fundamental rights and, in some cases, the dignity of Pakistani immigrants and refugees. The minister had stressed the need for immediately resolving the issue. On Pakistan's concern over people being deported without due verification, the EU has now agreed to the verification process proposed by the Ministry of Interior and promised to ensure deportation strictly in line with the readmission accord, immigration laws and procedures acceptable to Pakistan, says a handout issued by the ministry. It says that the EU has welcomed the standard operating procedures developed by Pakistan for transparent and speedy processing of verification applications as well as Pakistan's initiative of developing an electronic platform for the issuance of 'Emergency Travel Documents' to verified deportees. Appreciating the newly developed system of interrogation by Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency with a view to taking action against human traffickers and smugglers, the EU has agreed that a 15-day prior information in case of deportees through chartered flights and three days in case of commercial flights will be shared with Pakistan to help FIA to make necessary arrangements for their reception and interrogation. The JRC also discussed EU's broader engagement with Pakistan, including legal migration and mobility as well as reintegration of migrants sent back from the European Union. The meeting ended with a commitment to enhance

cooperation in managing current migration and security issues in order to take stronger action to meet the challenge.

Pakistan calls on world to combat Islamophobia⁹⁷

Decrying the rise of Islamophobia worldwide, Pakistan called on for action to combat the forces of xenophobia and warned that if timely steps were not taken to check this disturbing trend, it could threaten regional and global peace and security. Speaking at an event organised at the UN by Pakistan Mission and the OIC on “Countering Xenophobia through Interfaith Cooperation” on February 4, 2016, Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi said that Islamophobic acts were unfortunately taking place in countries known as traditional champions of human rights and humanitarianism. She regretted that some unprincipled politicians in the West had sought to build their political fortunes by spreading fear and xenophobia – promising to build walls against migrants; barring refugees, even widows and orphans; threatening to ban the adherents of a specific religion from entry to their countries’ shores. Unfortunately, she said, this campaign of hate and prejudice had received a fillip from ignorant Western media portrayals of Muslims.

Sri Lanka

India will support President Sirisena’s vision for Sri Lanka – President Mukherjee⁹⁸

Indian President Pranab Mukherjee said that India, as a close friend and neighbour, would support President Maithripala Sirisena’s vision for Sri Lanka. Extending greetings to Sri Lankan Government and its people on Independence Day Anniversary on February 4, President Mukherjee said “it gives me immense pleasure to extend warm felicitations and best wishes to Your Excellency and to the people of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka on the occasion of the 68th Anniversary of your Independence.”

External Affairs Minister of India Sushma Swaraj visits Sri Lanka⁹⁹

External Affairs Minister of India, Sushma Swaraj, led an inter-ministerial delegation to Colombo from February 5-6, 2016 for the 9th Session of the India-Sri Lanka Joint Commission. She co-chaired the Joint Commission meeting on February 5, 2016 with her Sri Lankan counterpart Mangala Samaraweera. The Joint Commission meeting, which was held after a gap of three years, reviewed the progress and developments in bilateral relations since the 8th Session held on January 22, 2013. On February 6, 2016, Minister Swaraj inaugurated the exhibition “Rise of Digital India” at the BMICH, which showcases advances made by India in the information technology and the digital revolution over the years. During her visit, Minister Swaraj called on President Maithripala Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, and former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. She also met Leader of Opposition, R. Sampanthan, as well as representatives of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress and Indian Origin Tamil parties.

UN human rights chief visits Sri Lanka¹⁰⁰

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein made a four-day official visit to Sri Lanka on February 6, 2016, at the invitation of

the Sri Lankan government. The High Commissioner called on the Minister of Foreign Affairs Mangala Samaraweera at the Ministry on the same day. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Harsha De Silva and delegates of the UN High Commission for Human Rights were also present at the meeting. Later, he met with the Ad Interim Resident Coordinator of UN in Sri Lanka Una McCauley, and the Heads of UN Agencies in Sri Lanka. The National Freedom Front (NFF), Sri Lanka's opposition political party led by MP Wimal Weerawansa, organised a protest in Colombo against the visit of the United Nations human rights chief. Hundreds of protesters carrying placards and shouting slogans gathered outside the UN complex in Colombo to protest the right chief's visit, which, according to the protesters, would affect the Sri Lankan military adversely. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein called on President Maithripala Sirisena at the Presidential Secretariat on February 9, 2016 and held cordial discussions on the current developments in Sri Lanka.

Assistant U.S. Trade Representative for South Asia visits Sri Lanka¹⁰¹

Assistant U.S. Trade Representative for South Asia Michael J. Delaney visited Colombo and met with Minister of Development Strategy and International Trade Malik Samarawickrema and representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Enterprise Development, the Board of Investments, the Department of Commerce, and the Prime Minister's office ahead of the upcoming Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) talks in Washington.

Mangala Samaraweera attends the UNDP 50th anniversary ministerial meeting¹⁰²

Minister of Foreign Affairs Mangala Samaraweera concluded a three day visit to New York to attend the UNDP 50th Anniversary Ministerial meeting held at the UN Headquarters, from the February 21-24. The Minister's visit commenced with a courtesy call on Helen Clark, Administrator of the UNDP, where he underscored the strong partnership between the organisation and the Sri Lankan Government and its people that had existed since the 1960s. Discussions included ways and means of enhancing this cooperative relationship, to meet the development challenges in Sri Lanka's current peace building environment. Samaraweera also met with Jeffrey Feltman, United Nations Under-Secretary General at the Department of Political Affairs, to discuss current peace building mechanisms and ongoing efforts to enhance Sri Lanka's peacekeeping presence around the world. At a luncheon meeting hosted by the Permanent Mission of Sweden in honour of Minister Samaraweera, together with key donor countries including US, Australia, Japan, and South Korea, he elaborated on Sri Lanka's Post Conflict Peace Building mechanisms, and the importance of development, stating that all stakeholders must feel that their development was being cared for and their lives were improving. He said that the relationship between peace and development was holistic and dynamic, and the faster the peace dividend the greater and faster the likelihood of a lasting peace. During the UNDP 50th Anniversary Ministerial Meeting, Minister Samaraweera served as a principal panellist at the thematic breakout session titled 'Preventing Violent Conflict, Building Peaceful Societies,' where he elaborated on the link between development and peace. During his visit, he also met the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway Borge Brende, and the Minister for Strategic Development and Nordic Cooperation of Sweden, Kristina Persson to discuss matters of mutual interest. The Minister further held meetings with the Permanent

Representative of the USA to the United Nations, Ambassador Samantha Power, and Deputy Permanent Representative Ambassador Michele Sison.

Mangala Samaraweera meets John Kerry¹⁰³

US Secretary of State John Kerry, speaking to reporters after meeting with his Sri Lankan counterpart Mangala Samaraweera, said that Sri Lanka has taken very impressive continuing steps towards reconciliation. Kerry said that his meeting with Samaraweera was taking place on the eve of a Strategic Dialogue with Sri Lanka, which will be led by US Under Secretary Tom Shannon. "Their efforts to try to address the regional issues, and most importantly, to make peace in their own country are very, very significant. And we really welcome you here," Kerry said. Samaraweera, who is in Washington to attend the US-Lanka strategic dialogue, said the relationship between the two countries has elevated recently. "And that is why I'm looking forward for the inaugural meeting of the U.S.-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue, which I'm sure will go – which will further strengthen and broaden the relationship between our two countries," he said.

Mangala, Power discuss expanding Lanka's role in peacekeeping¹⁰⁴

Minister of Foreign Affairs mangala Samaraweera met the US Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power and discussed issues related to Sri Lanka. During the talks the top US official and Samaraweera had also discussed the possibility of expanding Sri Lanka's role in UN peacekeeping operations. Samaraweera, who was in the US, also met other foreign diplomats based in New York and briefed them on the latest developments in Sri Lanka. Samaraweera attended a discussion at the US Institute of Peace, co-sponsored by the Heritage Foundation, on how the initiatives to advance reconciliation, post-conflict development and stronger democratic institutions are progressing.

US-Sri Lanka holds first annual partnership dialogue¹⁰⁵

The first US-Sri Lanka Annual Partnership Dialogue was held in Washington on February 26, 2016 with the participation of Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera. US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Shannon led the US delegation in the dialogue. The two sides discussed several issues including democratic governance, development cooperation, people-to-people ties, economic cooperation, security cooperation, international and regional affairs, and other issues of mutual interest.

Prime Minister of New Zealand visits Sri Lanka¹⁰⁶

Sri Lanka and New Zealand signed a partnership agreement for the Sri Lanka Dairy Excellence Training Initiative between the Sri Lanka Ministry of Rural Economic Affairs and the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade under the Dairy Cooperation Arrangement (DCA), which was signed in November 2013. The agreement was signed following bilateral talks between President Maithripala Sirisena and the visiting New Zealand Prime Minister, John Key on February 24, 2016. Secretary, Ministry of Rural Economic Affairs, Daya Ekanayake signed the MOU on behalf of the Government of Sri Lanka and New Zealand High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Grahame Morton signed on behalf of the New

Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. A Letter of Intent was also signed to gift a second baby elephant to Auckland Zoo. Delivering a media statement after conclusion of bilateral discussions with President Maithripala Sirisena, John Key said that he first visited Sri Lanka in 2013 for the Commonwealth Summit and in the current visit he personally noticed the vast transformations taken place in the country. Prime Minister of New Zealand John Phillip Key described Sri Lanka as the 'Shining Light of Asian Region'. He said there are enormous opportunities available in Sri Lanka for New Zealand entrepreneurs and investors.

President Sirisena visits Germany and Austria¹⁰⁷

President Maithripala Sirisena returned from his two state visits to Germany and Austria on February 21, 2016. During his visit to Germany from February 16-18, he met the Federal Chancellor Anjela Merkel and the President of Germany Joachim Gauck and had fruitful discussions to enhance the cooperation between the two countries in various fields. He also had bilateral discussions with the Foreign Minister Frank Walter and the Economic Affairs Minister Gerd Muller. Two MoUs were signed to enhance the economic and technical cooperation between Germany and Sri Lanka. Accordingly, Germany will provide a donation of 18million Euros to Sri Lanka. Under this grant 6 million Euros will be provided for the support of National Park and Buffer Zone Management of Wilpatthu while 4 million Euros will be provided for the Vocational Training in North of Sri Lanka. Funds will also be granted for the small and medium enterprises sector development and for the facilitation for initiatives for social cohesion and transformation in Sri Lanka. An MoU with the German Association for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (BVMV) on Small and Medium Enterprise Sector Development signed and it covers the area of technical capacity development in the apparel sector in specific areas such as: management techniques, fashion changes, capacity consuming etc. involves technical skill development, technology transfer, using IT platforms, market research, multidisciplinary studies in the apparel sector. A business meeting which was attended by the representatives of 250 leading companies in Germany was held with participation of President Sirisena. He invited the German entrepreneurs to invest in Sri Lanka which is now coming forward in the competitive world economy. The President invited the Sri Lankan expatriates in Germany to return Sri Lanka and build the motherland, experiencing the coexistence and the reconciliation which has been established in Sri Lanka after the end of terrorism. After concluding the state visit to Germany, the President left for Austria for two days state visit on February 18. He had productive bilateral discussions with the President of Austria Heins Fischer. He visited the historical art museum in Vienna during this visit. The business meeting headed by President Sirisena revealed that large number of leading Austrian companies are keen to invest in Sri Lanka. The President also met the Sri Lankan expatriates in Austria who had been organised a colourful festival to welcome the President.

ADB President visits Sri Lanka¹⁰⁸

Asian Development Bank President Takehiko Nakao called on President Maithripala Sirisena on February 23, 2016 at the Presidential Secretariat. Nakao arrived in Sri Lanka on February 22 on a two-day official visit. President held discussions on ADB-funded projects *i Sri Lanka*. Some of the new projects include

a Rural Electrification Project of \$70 million, an SME Credit Line of \$100 million and a Local Government Enhancement Sector Project costing of \$40 million. The ADB also expressed keenness to increase its funding portfolio by more than \$1.2 billion in the next three years. A new Country Partnership Strategy is also on the cards to cover the period 2017-2021.

IMF advises Sri Lanka to take urgent measures to narrow fiscal deficit¹⁰⁹

An International Monetary Fund (IMF) staff mission, concluding a five-day visit to Sri Lanka on February 5, 2016, advised the Sri Lankan Government to urgently make a stronger effort to narrow the fiscal deficit and put the public finances on a sustainable path although recent economic performance has been positive in a number of respects. The IMF staff mission visited Colombo from February 1-5 to discuss recent economic developments and policies for the year ahead. The team met with government and Central Bank officials, as well as representatives of academia, civil society and the private sector. The team issued a statement at the conclusion of its visit, where it mentioned "Recent economic performance has been positive in a number of respects. Real GDP growth of 5.2 per cent in the first three quarters of 2015 was achieved in the context of continued low inflation. Most sectors have shown positive growth, with particularly robust activity in tourism. Benefiting from low oil prices, the external current account balance has also narrowed to an estimated 2 per cent of GDP by end-2015, compared with 2.6 per cent in 2014. However, the government fiscal deficit for 2015 is estimated to have exceeded the original budget target. Based on the budget framework for 2016, IMF staff estimates suggest the fiscal deficit could widen further. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's public debt has risen to over 74 per cent of GDP by end-2015. Despite the narrowing of the current account, capital outflows have intensified and the overall balance of payments deteriorated. These outflows were accompanied by downward pressure on the rupee and a decline in central bank gross foreign exchange reserves mainly due to short-term capital outflows as experienced in many emerging markets. The mission has advised the government to urgently make a stronger effort to narrow the fiscal deficit and put the public finances on a sustainable path. The mission urged the authorities to take a growth and investment friendly approach to lowering the size of the 2016 budget deficit focusing mainly on measures to raise revenues by broadening the tax base, simplifying and making equitable the tax system, and improving tax administration, to lay the groundwork for further consolidation and debt reduction while also allowing for higher public investment.

Sri Lanka central bank liberalises foreign currency accounts¹¹⁰

The Central Bank of Sri Lanka announced on February 5 that it has eased the restrictions on remitting and transacting foreign currencies with immediate effect. "Foreign currencies can henceforth be remitted out of NRFC, RFC and RNNFC accounts and FEEA for any purpose and prior approval need not be obtained for such remittances," the Central Bank said in a statement. The measure has been taken to turn Sri Lanka into an international financial center. Up to US\$ 10,000 or its equivalent can be withdrawn in cash from such accounts for any purpose. Earlier money withdrawals were allowed for certain purposes like to meet education or medical expenses.

11th round of Iran-Sri Lanka trade talks held in Colombo¹¹¹

Iran has agreed to provide technical support to Sri Lanka, the Minister of Industry and Commerce Rishad Bathiudeen said following the end of the 11th round of Iran-Sri Lanka trade talks in Colombo on February 25. This was the first trade talks to be held with Sri Lanka after international sanctions were lifted on Iran. Iranian Minister of Energy and Water Hamid Chitchiaian, who attended the talks in Colombo, said that the areas of cooperation discussed between both sides included banking and investment, trading, standards, customs and economic cooperation, oil, energy and water, health, science and culture, and other mutually beneficial areas of two sides. According to the Department of Commerce, total trade between Sri Lanka and Iran surpassed \$ 1 billion in 2008 but decreased to \$ 162 million in 2015.

US to go ahead with anti-dumping probe on tyres from Sri Lanka¹¹²

A US investigative body has decided to go ahead with its anti-dumping investigations into a certain category of tyres imported from India and Sri Lanka that may have a damaging effect on the US domestic industry even as it let China off the hook, the Press Trust of India reported. All six commissioners of the United States International Trade Commission (USITC) voted to determine that there is a reasonable indication that the US industry is materially injured by imports of certain new pneumatic off-the-road tyres from India that are allegedly sold in the country at less than fair value and subsidised by the governments of India and Sri Lanka. According to a statement, the Commission further determined that imports of these products from China are negligible. Following the Commission's affirmative determinations, the US Department of Commerce will continue to conduct its investigations on imported products from India and Sri Lanka, with its preliminary countervailing duty determinations due on April 4 and its preliminary anti-dumping duty determinations due on June 16. As a result of the Commission's finding of negligibility, the investigations on imports of these products from China will be terminated, USITC said. This is the first time that anti-dumping investigations have been launched into tyres coming to the US from India, while Chinese tyres have faced a similar probe in the past.

Sri Lanka to implement a plan to monitor and combat human trafficking¹¹³

The Sri Lankan government has received approval from the Cabinet of Ministers to implement a five-year plan to monitor and combat human trafficking. Sri Lanka has ratified the UN protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children (Palermo Protocol) in 2015. The National Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force, recognising the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach to combat the serious offence of human trafficking, has developed a five year national strategic plan to monitor and combat human trafficking. Accordingly, the Cabinet has approved the 'National Strategic Plan to Monitor and Combat Human Trafficking 2015-2019' presented by the Minister of Justice Wijayadasa Rajapakshe.

Sri Lanka Navy participates in International Fleet Review 2016¹¹⁴

Commander of Sri Lanka Navy Vice Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne represented Sri Lanka at the International Fleet Review (IFR) 2016 held in India from February 4-8, 2016. A 275-member Sri Lankan delegation, led by Vice Admiral Wijegunaratne, and Sri Lanka Navy's Flag Ship SLNS Sayura took part in the second IFR organised by the Indian Navy and hosted by the Eastern Naval Command in the Bay of Bengal off Andhra Pradesh. International Fleet Review 2016 is an international military exercise hosted and conducted by Indian Navy on behalf of the President of India. Its objective is to enhance mutual trust and confidence with neighbouring navies by inviting their ships to participate in the event.

Sri Lankan army contingent leaves to join UN Interim Force in Lebanon¹¹⁵

The 10th Sri Lanka Army contingent for the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNFIL) left the country on February 29. The Sri Lanka Force Protection Unit (SLFPU) is comprised of 150 army personnel including 10 officers and 140 other ranks. The first advance 49 member party of the SLFPU left the country prior to this team on February 16, 2016. Since 2010 the Sri Lanka Army has to-date sent 9 such contingents to serve in Lebanon at the request of the UNIFIL.

Field Marshal Fonseka sworn in as cabinet minister for regional development¹¹⁶

Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka, was sworn in as the Cabinet Minister for Regional Development before President Maithripala Sirisena at the Presidential Secretariat on February 25, 2016.

End Notes

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