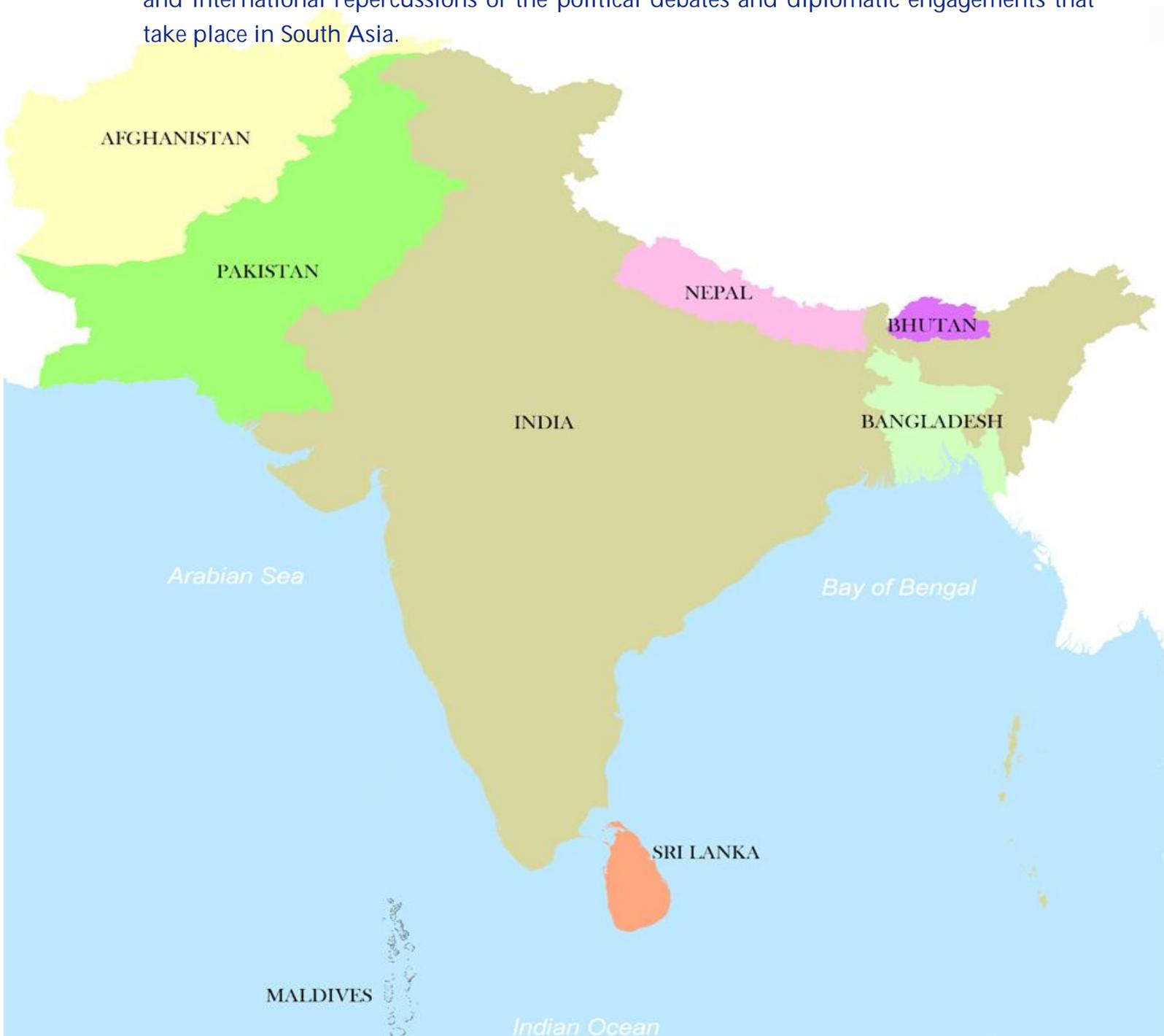


SOUTH ASIA TRENDS

March 2015

South Asia Trends is a monthly newsletter on South Asian affairs. The purpose of the newsletter is to provide a panoramic view of important events that shape and impact the politics of the subcontinent. The effort would be to inform our readers of the domestic, regional and international repercussions of the political debates and diplomatic engagements that take place in South Asia.



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Editor's Note

As the political stalemate continued in Bangladesh and Nepal, the region also witnessed political tension in Maldives over the arrest of former President Mohamed Nasheed. International community expressed serious concerns over unfair trial of Nasheed. MEA spokesperson Akbaruddin expressed India's concerns on Twitter, but no official statement was issued by the MEA over the issue. India has also avoided making any public comment on the political crises in Bangladesh and Nepal. There is also no official reaction to the Af-Pak cooperation on dialogue with the Taliban, even though commentators in India have expressed their concerns about growing ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

As Prime Minister Modi is emphasising on developing friendly relations with the neighbours, the government is perhaps avoiding any official stand on controversial issues in the neighbourhood.

Indian Government's neighbourhood policy is focussing on improving bilateral relations with the neighbouring countries. In this regard, three significant developments took place in March 2015. India increased its budget allocation for the neighbours; Prime Minister made a bilateral visit to Sri Lanka after 27 years and; India expressed its intention to resume dialogue with Pakistan during Foreign Secretary's visit to Islamabad as part of his SAARC Yatra.

In addition to India's bilateral relations, this issue covers significant developments in the domestic, economic and foreign affairs of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in the month.

Afghanistan

National Unity Government leaders visit the USA¹

President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdulla accompanied by Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani, National Security Adviser Hanif Atmar, Finance Minister Eklil Hakimi and other Afghan officials, went to the United States on March 21. During the visit, the National Unity Government (NUG) leaders met the U.S. President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, Congress members, the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary of the State John Kerry, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and other senior U.S. officials. In a joint press conference with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on March 24 at White House, President Obama stressed the need for continued support of Afghan forces. President Barack Obama pledged to continue to fund all the 352,000 Afghan forces until 2017, keeping the current posture of 9,800 U.S. troops in Afghanistan until the end of 2015 and an aid of US \$800 million to the unity government's reform agenda. Reportedly, the U.S. will keep open the Kandahar Airfield in southern Afghanistan and Jalalabad Airfield in eastern Afghanistan through 2015, a reversal from prior plans. President Ghani welcomed his American counterpart's decision of keeping their soldiers in the country. In his address to a joint meeting of U.S. congress in Washington, Ghani highly appreciated the gains by Afghan women, linking the achievements to the U.S. sacrifices over the past 13 years. The visit to the United States was a step to restore the strained relations between Kabul and Washington, the Chief Executive Abdullah Abdulla said, calling the trip productive.

ANSF still need sustained help: Austin²

Observing that Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have the capability to provide security to their people, General Lloyd Austin, Commander of the US Central Command, told American lawmakers on March 3 that they still need some help with sustainment. "The Afghans have the capability to provide for the security of their people and they demonstrate this on a daily basis. However, they do still need some help with sustainment; and, that includes resupply operations, particularly to remote or mountainous areas," General Austin told members of House Armed Services Committee during Congressional hearing. They need help with fixed-wing and rotary-wing aviation; and also with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support. "We will need to work closely with them to enable their success and aid them in building additional needed military capacity. We cannot afford for Afghanistan to once again become a safe haven for extremist groups. Increased instability and diminished security would not only affect Afghanistan, but also the Central Asia region as a whole," the general said. He also told lawmakers that the United States will maintain a unilateral capacity to conduct counter-terrorism operations against high-value targets and groups in the region.

Afghanistan protests the arrest of Afghan diplomats in Pakistan³

The Afghan government has strongly protested the arrest of four Afghan diplomats by Pakistan's police in Peshawar City as the country continues to force expulsion of Afghan refugees. In regards to the arrest of diplomats, the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) called Pakistan's Ambassador, Sayed Abrar Hussain, to

the ministry on March 2 to express Afghanistan's protest and concerns to Pakistan. According to Pakistan's media four Afghan diplomats were among 28 Afghan nationals arrested and locked in the last week of February in the University Town Police Station of Peshawar as part of country's crackdown against Afghan nationals illegally residing in the country.

Pak- Afghan ties gaining momentum: Sharif⁴

Talking to Afghanistan Ambassador to Pakistan Janan Mosazai, Pakistani Prime Minister Mohammad Nawaz Sharif said that relations between Islamabad and Kabul have been undergoing qualitative transformation since the new government took over last year. A statement from the prime minister house said that the meeting between the ambassador and the prime minister held in Islamabad on March 2. Mosazai thanked the government of Pakistan for providing generous support to Afghanistan in the form of relief supplies in the wake of the destruction caused by recent avalanches. He expressed satisfaction over the increased security cooperation between the two countries and said the visits of Pakistani army chief have proved quite helpful in streamlining important matters. The prime minister approved appointment of a focal person for following up implementation on the decisions taken during inter-ministerial meeting between the two countries, on a daily basis. Mosazai on the occasion said that Afghanistan was highly appreciative of prime minister's vision of peaceful coexistence with all neighbouring countries. He informed the prime minister that there was a strong domestic consensus in Afghanistan on peace efforts these days. Matters relating to Afghan Transit Trade and CASA 1000 power transmission project also came under discussion during the meeting.

Ghani heads high-level delegation to Saudi Arabia⁵

President Ashraf Ghani accompanied by a high-level government delegation went to Saudi Arabia on March 14 for a two-day official visit. The delegation included the National Security Advisor Mohammad Hanif Atmar, First Deputy Chief Executive Officer Mohammad Khan, Minister of Hajj and Religious Affairs Faiz Mohammad Osmani, Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Karzai, High Peace Council (HPC) Secretariat Chief Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai and other senior government officials. President Ashraf Ghani and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud held wide-ranging talks on a variety of subjects of bilateral importance, including enhanced economic cooperation. Ghani's visit to Saudi Arabia came at a time when peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban are a subject of discussion in media. Reportedly, Ghani's visit to Saudi Arabia, the first country to formally recognise the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, is aimed at paving grounds for peace talks with the Taliban.

UN calls for consensus on Government-Taliban talks⁶

The United Nations acknowledged intensified efforts were underway to bring the insurgents to the negotiations table, suggesting the process should go ahead in consultation with the people. Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN deputy special representative, made the remarks during a meeting with Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah at the Sapidar Palace in Kabul on March 17.

UNSC adopts a resolution extending the mandate of the UNAMA for another year⁷

In a debate on Afghanistan's situation at the UN Security Council on March 16, the Council unanimously adopted a resolution extending the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) for another year. Opening the debate, the UNAMA head Nicholas Haysom lauded the Afghan government's efforts for peace talks with the Taliban. The Security Council requested that the secretary-general initiate a process to conduct within six months a full examination of the role, structure and activities of all UN entities in Afghanistan.

Japan commits \$20 million of grant assistance to Afghanistan⁸

The government of Japan would provide a total amount of \$20,000,000 of grant assistance to Afghanistan through UN-Habitat for its community-led urban infrastructure programme in five cities including Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif and Jalalabad. A statement from the Japan Embassy issued on March 2 said that the programme responds to the urgent needs of recently displaced people, demobilised combatants and returnees through further empowering communities, enhancing their access to basic services and improving their livelihoods. The statement said that the UN-Habitat would address the urgent needs of those most vulnerable households through the establishment of community development councils to upgrade underserved areas in order to avoid disillusion and frustrations and reduce the risk that those households are falling back in illicit and insurgent activities. In total, approximately 236,000 people will benefit from this program. Cumulative Japanese assistance to Afghanistan since 2001 amounts \$5.78 billion.

15,000 ANA soldiers quit service in single year: SIGAR⁹

A new report published by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) based in Washington, D.C. indicates that, over the past year, some 15,000 Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers quit their jobs. According to SIGAR, the loss of 8.5 percent of the ANA's force to attrition has left it with a smaller number of troops than it had at the start of last year. In response to the report, the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MoD) published a press release on March 4 maintaining that the 15,000 figure in fact makes up just 3.5 percent of the military, and includes soldiers who were killed or injured in the line of duty. Yet analysts, including former security officials, have suggested the main factor behind the worrying attrition trend of the ANA that SIGAR hoped to highlight could simply be poor management on the part of the MoD.

MPs raise concerns about Daesh presence in Afghanistan¹⁰

The House of Representatives of Afghanistan summoned top security officials on March 23 to raise questions about security conditions around the country, including the voicing of growing concerns about the influence of Daesh in Afghanistan. "The Taliban in Badakhshan are going to turn into Daesh members, which is very concerning," Badakhshan MP Zekria Sowda told the security officials, which included the Minister of Interior and the acting heads of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) and Ministry of Defense (Mod). The representatives were eager

to dispel with the inconsistencies security officials have shown in their appraisal of the threat posed by Daesh in Afghanistan. "Officials from National Directorate of Security have said in Senate that Daesh does not exist, but officials from the Ministries of Defense and Interior have said that Daesh does exist," Kabul MP Farhad Sediqi said. "So, if they exist, please provide clarification about the whereabouts of the group and about their activities." The acting director of the NDS, Hesamuddin Hesam, responded to the lawmakers by saying that the Taliban has been fractured and that many of their disaffected members have begun to fly the Daesh flag. "After the operations in the Waziristan area by the Pakistani military, a number of foreigners have come to Afghanistan from Pakistan, in districts such as Khak Afghan of Zabul," Hesam said. "They want to attract our youth to Daesh and start their operations in the northern parts of the country in order to achieve their goals." One of the most high-profile Daesh-claimed incidents in Afghanistan so far was the kidnapping of 31 Hazara travelers along the Kabul-Kandahar highway in February.

India allocates Rs 6.76 billion for Afghanistan¹¹

India's total expenditure budget for foreign governments for the fiscal year 2015-16 is Rs. 97.35 billion, an increase by 26 percent. Afghanistan will receive Rs 6.76 billion. In the last fiscal year's budget, Afghanistan was allocated Rs 5.25 billion. Afghanistan is the second biggest receiver of Indian aid after Bhutan.

Bangladesh

Two bloggers killed in Bangladesh within a month¹²

The founder of Mukto-Mona (Free-mind) blog site, Avijit Roy's killing on February 26 in the TSC area of Dhaka University triggered strong condemnations from his fellow writers and publishers at home and abroad. Different political, social and cultural organisations including the ruling Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) strongly condemned the heinous killing and demanded bringing the perpetrators to the book. The United Nations and the USA have strongly condemned the killing of blogger Avijit Roy and expressed the hope that the perpetrators would be quickly brought to justice through a transparent process of law. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has also condemned the killing saying the attack on Avijit was part of a deadly cycle of violence as a culture of impunity prevails in Bangladesh. The US was ready to assist the investigation into the brutal killing, if sought, said US Department of State Spokesperson Jen Psaki in a statement issued on February 27. Responding to Washington's offer, Dhaka has decided to seek FBI's assistance in the Avijit murder probe. Meanwhile, Shafiur Rahman Farabi, who had issued repeated death threats to writer-blogger Avijit Roy, was arrested by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in Dhaka's Jatrabari area on March 2. Barely a month after the brutal murder of Avijit Roy, another blogger and online activist Oyasiqur Rhaman was hacked to death in broad daylight on March 30, 2015. Two of the attackers were caught by the public and handed over to police. They confessed to the killing during primary interrogation. The motive behind the murder appears to be "ideological differences", said Biplab Kumar Sarkar, deputy commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (Tejgaon division). A staunch critic of religious fundamentalism, Oyasiqur was active mostly on Facebook though he used to write in Bangla blogosphere. Immediately after his killing, social media was abuzz with condemnation.

Dhaka based foreign diplomats call for an end of political violence¹³

The BNP-led 20-party alliance had been enforcing countrywide indefinite blockade since January 6 demanding a midterm election under a non-partisan administration. The combine had also been enforcing nationwide hartals since February 1, except for weekends, to press home the demand. But, for the first time since then, it had not called for hartal on March 29, raising speculation that there could be a break from the strike. Ending all hope for a break from continuous hartals, the BNP-led 20-party alliance called for a 48-hour nationwide shutdown again from March 30. Dhaka and Chittagong cities would, however, be out of the purview of the hartal as polls to the city corporations were scheduled for April 28, said a BNP press release signed by its Joint Secretary General Barkat Ullah Bulu. The party enforced the hartal to press home various demands, including “safe and unhurt return” of missing BNP leader Salahuddin Ahmed and other opposition men. According to BNP insiders close to party chief Khaleda Zia, the alliance enforced fresh hartal because a section of party high-ups thought that the government would increase its “repression and harassment” on opposition men if they leave the “battleground”. Some foreign diplomats, including the US and EU ambassadors in Dhaka stressed the need for building confidence among political parties to de-escalate the country’s political conflict on March 3. The diplomats were in a meeting with BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia at her Gulshan office. Briefing journalists after the meeting, Australian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Greg Wilcock said: “We encouraged confidence-building measures, including the de-escalation of Bangladesh’s political conflict, in the interest of fostering safety, stability, growth, human rights and democracy in Bangladesh.” The meeting with the BNP chief followed a similar meeting with the Bangladesh Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali on March 1, he added. Recalling their previous statements on events in Bangladesh, and those by the UN, the envoys said as friends and partners of Bangladesh they would continue to express their common hopes to all sides. Ambassadors, High Commissioners and Charges d’Affairs of the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Turkey attended the briefing.

Indian foreign secretary visits Bangladesh¹⁴

Indian Foreign Secretary Dr. Subramanyam Jaishankar, visited Dhaka on March 2 for less than a 24-hour visit. Dr. Jaishankar handed over Modi’s letter to Hasina when he called on her at her parliament office. In that letter, Modi invited Hasina to visit India at her earliest convenience. The foreign secretary said India would remove all the trade barriers and would soon give their feedback on the list of para-tariff barriers given to the Indian side. During the short visit, Dr. Jaishankar met Foreign Minister of Bangladesh A.H. Mahmood Ali and the Foreign Secretary. After his meeting with the foreign minister, Jaishankar told reporters that he had a very successful and constructive meeting. Earlier emerging from meeting with the foreign secretary, Jaishankar said he discussed a wide range of issues. Asked whether they discussed Teesta issues at the meeting, the Indian Foreign Secretary parried the question saying, “That’s all I would like to say at this time.”

India allocates Rs 2.5 billion for Bangladesh¹⁵

India's total expenditure budget for foreign governments for the fiscal year 2015-16 is Rs 97.35 billion, an increase by 26 percent. Bangladesh has been allocated Rs 2.5 billion in grant.

Top Bangladeshi criminal arrested in India¹⁶

Mollah Masud, a top Bangladeshi criminal for whom Interpol issued red notice, was arrested in India. The Criminal Investigation Department of West Bengal arrested Masud on February 8 in a case filed with Barrackpore Police Station under Section 14 of Foreigners Act relating to illegal stay in the country. Masud fled to India in 2001 as Dhaka Metropolitan Police put him on a list of 23 most-wanted criminals and announced bounty for his capture. He, however, sneaked back into the country on several occasions until 2004. In another development, India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) filed a charge sheet against 21 people, including four alleged Bangladeshi nationals, in the Burdwan blast case. The Indian security agency suspected Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) to be involved in the blast. The Bangladeshi nationals named in the charge sheet, which was filed by the NIA in the court of NIA Special Judge, Kolkata, resided in Murshidabad, Birbhum, Nadia and Burdwan districts of West Bengal. Of them, only one was arrested by the NIA and the other three have been cited as absconding in the three-page charge sheet filed six months after a blast had taken place in a house at Khagragarh in Burdwan on October 2 last year.

RAB seizes a huge cache of explosives and bombs in Chittagong¹⁷

In an overnight raid on February 28, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) seized a huge cache of explosives and bombs from a militant hideout at Halishahar in Chittagong. The haul includes 150 kilograms of explosives, 76 "powerful bombs" including 22 improvised explosive devices, 30 kinds of bomb-making materials and 24 shotgun shells. Four people, including a woman, were arrested at the house. The elite force personnel also recovered a number of books and documents on jihad and a copy of the constitution of Islami Chhatra Shibir, the student front of Jamaat-e-Islami which is a key member of the BNP-led 20-party alliance. The drive was a sequel to a February 21 raid in which the RAB busted a militant training camp camouflaged as a poultry and livestock farm in Chittagong's Banskhal, arrested five people and seized some firearms, including AK-47 assault rifles, and training equipment.

BAPEX finds new gas layer¹⁸

Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Ltd. (BAPEX) has found commercially recoverable gas and condensate in a new layer in a well in Koilashtila gas field in Sylhet. Officials said the new layer was found at a depth of 3,127 to 3,133 metres in the gas field's well no-7. Once the test production is completed, Sylhet Gas Fields Ltd. (SGFL) the operating company of the field, will be able to produce at least 10 million cubic feet of gas a day and 80 barrel of condensate from this layer. Condensate can be used to produce high-octane petrol, as well as jet and diesel fuels. Officials of BAPEX and SGFL termed the breakthrough a big achievement, as no gas or condensate was found at this depth

in all six other wells at the gas field. Bapex drilled the well in the last five months with high hopes of oil and gas discovery with rig Bijoy-10. It, however, did not find any oil as it had been hoping earlier.

Trade deficit doubles¹⁹

Trade deficit more than doubled in the first seven months of the fiscal year from a year ago on the back of high import growth. At the end of January, the trade deficit stood at \$5.72 billion, up from \$2.79 billion recorded a year ago, according to central bank statistics. During the period, imports soared 16.43 percent, while exports crept up 2.07 percent. According to the central bank, imports dropped 7 percent year-on-year in January and in the first two weeks of February, it declined 6.94 percent. During the period, net FDI rose 5 percent to \$850 million and medium- and long-term loans 12 percent to \$1.4 billion.

Bangladesh to buy ships from China and Italy²⁰

The Government of Bangladesh is going to purchase 10 ships from China and Italy at a cost of Tk 2,777 crore under state arrangement. Of the ships, four will be bought from Italy at a cost of Tk 965 crore to improve naval capability of Bangladesh Coast Guard. Six other ships will be purchased from China National Machinery Import & Export Corporation (CMC) for Bangladesh Shipping Corporation (BSC) at a cost of Tk 1,812 crore. The cabinet committee on purchase approved two separate proposals for purchasing the ships. Of the four ships, two will be delivered within one year while the rest in two years' time from the date of signing of an agreement, according to the home ministry proposal. The payment for ships will be made from the government's own fund in nine instalments within four years' time. All the four ships, used by the Italian Navy, will be turned into Off-shore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) before purchasing them. Of the six ships to be purchased for BSC, three are oil tankers valued at \$36.20 million per tanker and three bulk carriers valued at \$25.30 million per carrier, according to the shipping ministry proposal. These ships are being procured under Chinese concessional loans financed by Chinese Exim Bank at 2 percent interest rate and under a repayment period of 20 years with a five-year grace period.

BIMSTEC finalises draft deal to set up grid connection among member countries²¹

A BIMSTEC meeting, held on March 16 finalised a draft deal to set up power grid connections for electricity trade among its seven member countries — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Senior officials of the member countries at the 5th meeting of the BIMSTEC Task Force on Trans Power Exchange finalised the MoU at Hotel Sonargaon in Dhaka. The meeting highlighted the rich hydropower potential of the BIMSTEC member nations, especially India, Myanmar, Bhutan and Nepal.

Permanent secretary for the Department for International Development of the UK visits Dhaka²²

Mark Lowcock, Permanent Secretary for the Department for International Development of the UK, arrived in Dhaka on March 15 to observe UK aid's

contribution to economic growth and poverty reduction in Bangladesh. This is Lowcock's second visit to Bangladesh. He last toured the country in 2011, the British High Commission in Dhaka said in a statement. The UK government is the largest bilateral donor of Bangladesh with an aid programme directly helping millions of the poorest people in the country.

Danish Minister for Trade and Development Cooperation visits Dhaka²³

Danish Minister for Trade and Development Cooperation Mogens Jensen came to Dhaka on March 17 on a three-day visit to promote development cooperation with government officials and political leaders. This was his first visit to Bangladesh after he assumed his current role. He was accompanied by the permanent secretary of the Danish Ministry of Employment, and senior officials from the Danish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

Bangladesh extends its support to the Saudi led air strike in Yemen²⁴

Bangladesh declared its support to the Saudi-led coalition which launched air strikes against Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen on March 26 after the rebels took control of large parts of the country. "Bangladesh strongly condemns actions by the Houthis against the legitimate government led by President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi of Yemen. It deplores acts of violence perpetrated by them on the people of Yemen resulting in humanitarian crisis," said a foreign ministry statement. The Bangladesh government backed all efforts led by Saudi Arabia in restoring the legitimate state authority and realisation of aspirations of the people of Yemen, as well as upholding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Yemen, the statement added. Dhaka also urged resumption of political process guided by the commitment made by the parties within the Gulf Cooperation Council Framework, the National Dialogue Conference outcomes and relevant UN Security Council resolutions.

Bhutan

Foreign Secretary of India visits Bhutan²⁵

Foreign Secretary of India Subrahmanyam Jaishankar made an official visit to Bhutan on March 1. This was his first official visit abroad since his appointment as the foreign secretary on January 29, 2015. Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar called on Lyonchhen Tshering Tobgay on March 1 in Thimphu. Lyonchhen congratulated Dr. Jaishankar on his appointment and thanked the Government of India for supporting Bhutan in its development activities. Dr. Jaishankar assured India's consistent support in Bhutan's development activities. The King of Bhutan also granted an audience to the Indian Foreign Secretary on March 1 in Thimphu.

India increases aid to Bhutan²⁶

The government of India has significantly increased the financial aid package to Bhutan to Rs. 61.6 billion in its annual budget for 2015-16 presented in the Indian parliament. This is an increase of Rs. 12.88 billion from last year. India had allocated Rs. 48.72 billion for the fiscal year 2014-15 under the "Grants and Loans to Foreign Governments" expenditure head. Bhutan is the biggest receiver of Indian aid. Bhutan's share of aid comprises 63 percent of the total grants and loans India will disburse to foreign governments during the new fiscal year. Under the "plan

expenditure" heading, India increased aid by 33 percent. Grants and loans for the five-year plan activities have increased to Rs 49.6 billion from Rs 37.25 billion last year. Rs. 12 billion has been set aside under the non-plan expenditure heads. However, there is only a 4 percent increase under non-plan heads of expenditure. India last year allocated Rs. 11.46 billion under this expenditure head. The non-plan aids are in grant form. Overall, Indian aid to Bhutan increased by 26 percent this year. India has agreed to provide Rs. 45 billion for the 11th Plan, excluding the Rs. 5 billion as economic stimulus package to boost the economy and help Bhutan overcome the problems arising out of the acute INR shortage.

"Indian budget presents opportunities for Bhutan"²⁷

The reduction in customs duty by the Indian government in its national budget 2015-16 is expected to make import of some goods from India cheaper. Customs duty is an indirect tax levied on goods imported into or from a country. Though India's financial year begins from April 1, the impact could be felt from June, according to officials. Due to a direct correlation, the tax measures announced will have indirect impact or open areas of opportunities for Bhutan. The Indian government has reduced basic customs duty on 22 items, including raw materials, components and intermediaries, which will reduce manufacturing costs. This was revealed during the presentation on "Indian budget 2015-16: Opportunities for Bhutan" at Tashi Taj hotel in Thimphu on March 6. This, the chief executive officer of Druk Punjab National Bank (PNB), Mukesh Dave, said would have a positive impact on Bhutanese economy with reduced costs of import. Mukesh Dave said that the Indian government's special focus on northeastern states, by launching of important infrastructure projects would benefit Bhutan. Speaking during the presentation, Indian ambassador Gautam Bambawale said, neighbours like Bhutan should gain from India's economic growth. He said Bhutan should promote agro-processing industries to promote export. "Bhutan should go beyond hydro-power and tourism."

India provides scholarship to the Bhutanese students²⁸

The Indian Ambassador to Bhutan, Gautam Bambawale handed over a cheque of Nu 6.97 million to the Royal Civil Service Commission Chairperson, Karma Tshiteem, for the Nehru-Wangchuk Scholarship Scheme (NWSS) on March 5. The Nehru-Wangchuk Scholarship Scheme was instituted on June 19, 2009 with a signing of a MoU. The MoU's duration of five years ended in June last year. During the first phase, 39 candidates availed the scholarship in India for both Masters and PhD programmes. Following the MoU's renewal for another five years, to date 28 candidates have been awarded the scholarship.

Japan Government extends grant assistance to NGOs in Bhutan²⁹

Japan's ambassador to Bhutan, Takeshi Yagi, signed grant contracts with two non-governmental organisations (NGO) in the country, RENEW and Draktsho, on March 5. Both projects are under Japan's grant assistance for grassroots projects (GGP), which provides funds for relatively small projects that directly benefit local communities at the grassroots level. This is the first time that the Japanese government is assisting an NGO in Bhutan.

Tshering Tobgay visits the USA³⁰

Lyonchoen Tshering Tobgay visited the USA on March 14 for ten days to promote the 'Bhutan for Life' initiative and solicit funds to make that happen. At the end of the visit, Bhutan's partners in this noble initiative, philanthropists and multinational corporations, together have committed US\$ 40 million. 'Bhutan for Life' is a major initiative of the government of Bhutan and the World Wildlife Fund to ensure sustainable financing for the conservation of Bhutan's protected areas and biological corridors.

Chief Operations Officer of the Royal Bhutan Army visits New York³¹

Chief Operations Officer of the Royal Bhutan Army, Lt. General Batoo Tshering participated in the first ever Conference of the Chiefs of Defence that the UN Secretary General convened on March 27 in New York to discuss UN peacekeeping operations.

Nu 508 million remitted in 2014³²

There was a small but increasing flow of remittances to Bhutan from Bhutanese working abroad, particularly in the US and Australia. Non-resident Bhutanese remitted various currencies worth Nu 508 million from January to December, 2014, according to the Royal Monetary Authority's monthly bulletin of February. This was an increase of Nu 164 million from Nu 344.6 million in the previous year during the same period. In other words, remittances increased by 47 percent in 2014. Bhutan received AU \$ 4.24 million, which is roughly Nu 203 million at the current buying rate. Remittances received from the US amounted to US\$ 4.15 million or Nu 261 million. Remittances from Australia and the US comprised 91 percent of the total remittance receipts for Bhutan. Meanwhile, the government has plans to send about 30,000 Bhutanese to work abroad. This is further to likely increase foreign remittance to Bhutan.

Bhutan ranks 104 in press freedom ranking³³

Bhutan's press freedom ranking fell by 12 places in 2014, according to the latest World Press Freedom index, released in February 2015. Bhutan was ranked 104 out of 180 countries with a score of 32.65 out of a possible 100. The France-based organisation, Reporters Without Borders World report ranked the performance of 180 countries according to a range of criteria that include media pluralism and independence, respect for the safety and freedom of journalists, and the legislative, institutional and infrastructural environment in which the media operates. In the South Asia region Bhutan has the best working environment for the media industry. After Bhutan is Nepal close behind at 105, Afghanistan is 122, India is 136, Bangladesh 146, Pakistan 159, Sri Lanka 165, and China is 176. The indicators compiled by Reporters Without Borders show a drastic decline in freedom of information in 2014. Two-thirds of these countries surveyed for the report showed a decline in their performance from the previous year.

Maldives

US, India express concerns over 13 years of sentence to Nasheed³⁴

America and India has expressed concerns after the former president, Mohamed Nasheed was sentenced to 13 years in prison. The Voice of America said that the American envoy for South East Asia, Nisha Biswal met with the Maldivian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dunya Maumoon and expressed her concerns. Spokesperson for the State Department Jen Psaki issued a press release calling for the democratic rights of the Maldivian citizens and independence of the judiciary system. The press release also called for the government to provide safety for the former president while he is serving the sentence. The Spokesperson for the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Syed Akbaruddin expressed the Indian concerns on Twitter.

UN high commissioner criticises the trial of Nasheed³⁵

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein has said that the trial of the former president of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed was flawed and unfair. In a statement issued on March 18, the High Commissioner said the sentence handed down by the criminal court in Male, the Maldivian capital, was part of "a rushed process" that prevented Nasheed's defense from calling witnesses.

Australia expresses concerns over Nasheed's arrest³⁶

Australia has expressed their concerns after the former president Mohamed Nasheed was sentenced to 13 years in prison. The Australian High Commission on Colombo issued a press release on March 17 saying that they have been monitoring the situation since the former president's arrest on February 22. And while the situation was being monitored, concerns about the legal proceedings have been shared directly with the Maldivian government through the Maldivian ambassador for Australia. "As a fellow member of the Commonwealth and signatories to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, Australia and the Maldives share a commitment to fundamental rights and freedoms, including those of due process, judicial fairness and rule of law." The statement said. The Australian government urged the Maldivian government to ensure that any appeal process for the former President to be handled transparently.

Dunya Maumoon defends government's decision to arrest Nasheed³⁷

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dunya Maumoon has defended the 13 year sentence against the former president Mohamed Nasheed, responding to the international community. The foreign minister told the press in Colombo on March 16 that the trial was conducted in accordance with the relevant laws and criminal procedures prevailing in the Maldives. Due process was followed and president Nasheed was accorded his rights fully. The government of Maldives has invited the United Nations Secretary-General, the Commonwealth, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the European Union (EU) to depute experts to observe the appeal process of former President Nasheed. According to a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the invitation was extended on behalf of the government by Minister of Foreign Affairs Dunya Maumoon.

Government will uphold rule of law, President tells British High Commissioner³⁸

British High Commissioner accredited to the Maldives John Rankin has paid a farewell call on President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom. Discussions took place during the meeting regarding the current political situation of the country, and President Yameen reiterated the government's commitment to uphold the rule of law and consolidating democracy in the Maldives. The British High Commission in Colombo tweeted that during the discussion, Rankin raised concerns regarding judicial independence and due process for former President Mohamed Nasheed and former Minister of Defence Mohamed Nazim. According to the British High Commission, President Yameen assured the safety of both Nasheed and Nazim.

Opposition groups organise anti-government march in Male³⁹

Opposition groups have held an anti-government march in Malé on March 27, 2015, demanding the release of former President Mohamed Nasheed, former Minister of Defence Mohamed Nazim, and Galolhu-South MP Ahmed Mahloof. Addressing the participants at Artificial Beach, Chairperson of Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) Ali Waheed criticised the government and said that the country was falling behind, instead of moving forward in terms of development.

AP decides not to support the government⁴⁰

Adhaalath Party (AP) has announced its decision not to support the government, citing constitutional violations and abuse of public confidence by the government. The decision was finalised at a meeting by the party leadership on March 8. In a statement, the party criticised the government and said that although it supported President Abdulla Yameen in the Presidential Election 2013 and helped him win the election, it has decided to withdraw its support because over the short period the government has been in power, the it has been engaged in high levels of corruption and activities which are not in line with the spirit of the constitution. Adhaalath Party said that this move follows official and unofficial discussions with the government, which have failed to make any headway; and also confirmation that continuing to work with the government would not result in any reform. Adhaalath Party's news came shortly after the President's Office announced that the President plans to share with the public details of the recent discussions between him and President of Adhaalath Party Imran Abdulla.

President visits Saudi Arabia⁴¹

The Government of Maldives and Saudi Arabia have held official talks, led by President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom and His Royal Highness Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, King of Saudi Arabia and the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. The discussions were focused on further expanding and diversifying the long existing bilateral relations between the two countries in various areas of development. Underscoring the Maldives Government's initiatives to transform the Maldivian economy, discussions were also held on increasing the number of Saudi investments in the Maldives. Further, both the Maldivian and Saudi Governments reiterated their commitments to increasing cooperation to preserve the Islamic identity and values. King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud expressed his interests in establishing a Saudi Embassy in the Maldives, which would enhance

the brotherly ties between the Maldives and Saudi Arabia. President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom went to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on the invitation of Saudi King. President Yameen was accompanied by a high-level delegation that includes leader of the Maldives Development Alliance Ahmed Siyam Mohamed, Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture Dr. Mohamed Shainee, and Minister of Islamic Affairs Dr. Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed. During the visit, President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, and Minister of Education of Saudi Arabia, Dr. Azzam bin Mohammed Al-Dhakhil, held discussions on increasing Saudi Arabia's assistance in providing higher education opportunities for Maldivian students. The discussions were held during a courtesy call paid on President Yameen, by the Saudi Arabian Education Minister. The President was also called on by Minister of Defence and Chief of Royal Court, His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Bin Abdulaiz Al Saud, Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, Ali Bin Ibrahim Al-Naimi, Minister of Finance, Dr. Ibrahim bin Abdulaziz Al-Assaf, and the Minister of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Call and Guidance, Sheikh Saleh bin Abdulaziz Al Ash-Sheikh.

Nepal Prime Minister writes to President Yameen⁴²

In a letter sent to President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, Prime Minister of Nepal, Sushil Koirala expressed his appreciation to President Yameen for the significant contributions he had made as outgoing Chair of SAARC, in taking the process of regional cooperation forward. He also thanked the members of the Maldivian delegation who attended the 18th SAARC Summit, for their active participation, constructive efforts, and erudite deliberations on the issues of common concerns of the South Asian region. He has assured President Yameen that Nepal, as the SAARC's current Chair, would make all possible efforts in cooperation and collaboration with member states, to promote regional cooperation and bring about visible changes in the living standards of people. Highlighting the bilateral relations between Nepal and the Maldives, Prime Minister Koirala had pointed out that the Maldives and Nepal possessed great potentials to enlarge the scope of cooperation in many areas for mutual benefit. He reiterated that Nepal remains committed to further cementing historically warm and friendly ties between the Maldives and Nepal.

India interested to take part in the development of the Maldives' SEZ⁴³

Indian High Commissioner to the Maldives Rajeev Shahare has said that India truly looks forward to participating in the development of the Maldives' Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Shahare made this remark at an event at the Indian Cultural Centre on March 27, 2015, to celebrate the golden jubilee of the Indian Technical and Educational Cooperation (ITEC) program.

Maldivian Prosecutor General meets his Russian counterpart⁴⁴

Prosecutor General of Maldives Muhthaz Muhsin met with Russian Prosecutor General Yury Chaika, as part of his ongoing visit to Russia. The officials agreed during discussions to facilitate training for Maldivian prosecutors in Russia, as well as to have Russian experts visit Maldives to provide training to Maldivian prosecutors. Discussions also took place regarding an extradition agreement, and cooperation in relation to criminal prosecution between the two countries. The

meeting was also attended by Deputy Prosecutor General Mahmood Saleem, Legal Affairs Director of the Prosecutor General's Office Mohamed Iyaz, and senior officials of the Russian Prosecutor General's Office.

Maldivian companies participate in the Moscow International Travel and Tourism Exhibition⁴⁵

The Deputy Director of the Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation (MMPRC), Ibrahim Asim said that 41 exhibitors from 23 companies of Maldives took part in the biggest tourism fair in Russia, the Moscow International Travel and Tourism Exhibition that started on March 18.

Chief of Defence Force visits Malaysia⁴⁶

Chief of Defence Force Major General Ahmed Shiyam made an official visit to Malaysia. Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) said that during this visit, Shiyam attended the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition 2015.

Parliament Passes the prison and parole amendment bill⁴⁷

The Amendment Bill to the Prison and Parole Act submitted by the government, which states that criminal convicts cannot be members of political parties, has been passed by parliament. Former President Mohamed Nasheed would no longer be a member of Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) once the law is enforced following ratification by the President. This would leave the post of President of MDP vacant. The bill, submitted on behalf of the government by Gemanafushi MP Jameel Usman, was passed with 43 votes in favour. MDP supporters protested outside the parliament building during voting. Protesters claimed that Nasheed was elected as president by the party, and cannot be removed from the post by anyone other than the party. MPs of MDP did not participate in the vote, and instead shouted and protested when the vote was taken. The parliament sitting was chaired by Deputy Speaker Reeko Moosa Manik.

Nepal

Stalemate continues over constitution writing⁴⁸

Threatening to walk out of the government if the Nepali Congress is not ready to push the majority process of constitution writing the ruling CPN-UML has decided to mount pressure on the largest party to proceed with the Constituent Assembly (CA) process. UML leaders say there has to be one last attempt to hold talks with the opposition and if that does not yield any results, the CA should initiate the process to decide the contentious issues of constitution writing through a vote. Accordingly, formal talks between the major political parties were held at Prime Minister's official residence in Baluwatar on March 7. The meeting could not come out with any solution and the Participants decided to hold talks again in the future. Subsequently, in separate meetings with the Nepali Congress and the CPN-UML, Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai on March 24 asked the ruling parties to persuade their leadership about the need for consensus. Bhattarai had a discussion with NC leader and Minister Mahesh Acharya. From the UML, he met the party's Chief Whip Agni Kharel to express his concerns. The UCPN (Maoist) has proposed the continuation of efforts to seek consensus on the disputed issues, arguing that

following the majority process of constitution writing or enforcing more street protests would both be counterproductive. Opposition leader Dahal also met with top leaders of the ruling Nepali Congress and CPN-UML separately and said his party could reconsider street protests if the ruling coalition agreed to promulgate the new constitution through consensus. During another meeting, Prime Minister Sushil Koirala and UML Chairman KP Sharma Oli also reached an understanding to make efforts to promulgate the new charter by May 29, the Republic Day, by building consensus among the key forces. In a meeting held at Oli's residence in Balkot, the two leaders also agreed to promulgate the statute through majority votes in the CA if consensus efforts go in vain. They were of the view that constitution writing could complicate further if the process was prolonged.

UCPN (M)-led 30 party alliance decides to intensify its second round of protest⁴⁹

The UCPN (M)-led 30-party alliance on March 29 decided to intensify its second round of protest programme across the country, demanding that new constitution should be drafted on the basis of broader consensus. A meeting of the opposition front claimed the ruling parties were against genuine agreement and wanted to weaken their ongoing protest. The front, however, maintained that it is ready for the dialogue anytime if the ruling parties come up with consensual model. UCPN (M) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal had held several rounds of negotiations with the ruling parties, primarily with Prime Minister Sushil Koirala and CPN-UML Chairman KP Oli, but without success. The agitating parties have announced to enforce nationwide shutdowns in April. They have also threatened to close government offices and obstruct tax collection. The front, which had earlier decided to boycott both CA session and Parliament, however, has decided to attend Parliament meetings.

Indian External Affairs Minister is for constitution in accord: Bhattarai⁵⁰

Indian Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj has suggested that Nepal's political parties should write their new constitution on the basis of consensus, not with a majority in the Constituent Assembly. During a meeting with (UCPN) Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai on March 3, Swaraj stressed that the Nepali parties should move ahead in the spirit of past agreements—12-point agreement, Comprehensive Peace Accord and the Interim Constitution. Bhattarai has been meeting with top political leaders and officials in New Delhi.

UCPN (Maoist) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal visits China⁵¹

UCPN (Maoist) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal left for China on March 23 on a weeklong visit at the invitation of the Communist Party of China. Talking to media persons before flying to China, Dahal said it was up to the political parties in Nepal to end the deadlock in the constitution drafting process. He, however, said the goodwill and support of the neighbouring India and China is essential in the process. Dahal was accompanied by party General Secretary Krishna Bahadur Mahara.

President visits China⁵²

President Ram Baran Yadav went to China on a four-day official visit on March 26 to attend the Boao Forum for Asia annual conference in Hainan Province from

March 26-29. The head of state's 18-member entourage included his daughter Anita, Minister for Urban Development Narayan Khadka, President's Foreign Relations Adviser Hari Sharma and Legal Adviser Surya Dhungel. During the visit, President met his Chinese counterpart. Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a 900 million RMB economic package to Nepal during the meeting with President Ram Baran Yadav on March 28. The assistance will be used to upgrade the 115-km Araniko Highway that links Nepal with China, and to develop the transport infrastructure. The meeting was the first between the heads of state of the two countries after Nepal was declared a republic in 2008. The aid is on top of the annual Chinese assistance to Nepal that was recently increased from 150million RMB to 800million RMB. During the bilateral meeting, the Chinese government also announced 1,500 training slots for Nepalis in technical and non-technical sectors over the next five years. President Yadav addressed the Boao conference on March 28. He said that the Forum had a crucial role of bringing Asian nations closer. He invited investments in infrastructure development, hydropower, agriculture, tourism and information technology in Nepal. President Yadav also met Austrian President Heinz Fischer and Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven on the sidelines of the conference.

Foreign Minister visits China⁵³

At the invitation of the Chinese government, Foreign Minister Mahendra Bahadur Pandey went to Beijing on March 17 for an official visit. During the visit, Mahendra Bahadur Pandey paid a courtesy call on Chinese Vice-president Li Yuanchao at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on March 19. During the meeting, the two leaders talked about the longstanding relationship between Nepal and China, and exchanged happiness on the two countries completing six decades of diplomatic relations. In a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at Great Hall of the People on March 18, Minister Pandey welcomed China's pro-neighbourhood diplomacy and hoped that Nepal will take benefit from China's development, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said in a statement. Pandey also assured his Chinese counterpart that Nepal would actively participate in China's Silk Road Economic Belt initiative. Minister Pandey said that Nepal will firmly pursue the one-China policy and will never allow any forces use Nepali territory to engage in anti-China activities. Pandey also thanked China for supporting Nepal's efforts to safeguard its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

China jacks up aid to Nepal five-fold⁵⁴

China has boosted its annual grant assistance to Nepal more than five-fold to RMB 800 million to mark the 60th year of the establishment of bilateral relations. Finance Secretary Suman Prasad Sharma and Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Wu Chuntai signed an accord on the increased aid at the finance ministry on March 17 on behalf of their respective governments. Nepal has been receiving RMB 150 million annually as grant assistance from the northern neighbour. The increased amount has been received under Economic and Technical Cooperation. Speaking at the signing ceremony, Sharma said the grant received from China would be spent on various development projects including the construction of mega infrastructure.

Chinese company to invest in cement industry in Nepal⁵⁵

China's Hongshi Holdings Group signed a joint venture (JV) agreement with Shivam Holdings Nepal to set up a Rs30 billion cement factory. The Hongshi Holdings will invest Rs21 billion (70 percent) in the project while the Nepali partner will inject Rs 9 billion. Hongshi Holdings' investment will be the third largest FDI in cement industry after the Nigeria-based Dangote Group and Reliance Cements of India. The joint venture will be named Hongshi-Shivam Cement Private Limited. An agreement to this effect was signed by Vishwonath Goel, chairman of Shivam Holdings, and Xu Youyuan, executive vice-president of Hongshi Holdings, in Kathmandu on March 17.

Government of Nepal for multi-pronged approach to promote human rights: Pandey⁵⁶

Foreign Affairs Minister Manendra Bahadur Pandey said the government is undertaking multi-pronged approach to advance human rights situation in the country and that measures are adopted for protection of rights and empowerment of disadvantaged and economically weaker segments of the population. Addressing the high-level segment of the 28th Session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva on March 3, Pandey reiterated Nepal's total and unflinching commitment to human rights and he highlighted various legislative and institutional measures put in place in Nepal in order to further protect and promote human rights of all citizens equitably. He said that the Human Rights Council and other UN human rights mechanisms should strictly adhere to the fundamental universal principles of universality, objectivity and non-selectivity and that the international community must strive hard to create an environment that fosters free and unhindered enjoyment of all human rights by all peoples around the world. He also emphasised on the universal, indivisible, interrelated, interdependent and mutually-reinforcing nature of all human rights and called for a holistic approach to address the human rights issues facing the world today.

India hikes grant to Nepal⁵⁷

India has increased grant aid to Nepal by 40 percent to INRs 4.2 billion in the annual budget for 2015-16 presented on February 28. For this fiscal year, India had allocated INRs 3 billion for Nepal. Nepal has been allocated the fourth largest amount of grant in South Asia after Bhutan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Indian grant support to Nepal includes that to BP Koirala Institute of Health and Science under India's faculty support. Since 2013-14, India has also been also providing an annual funding of INRs 10 million to the hospital towards partially covering hiring of Indian faculty for the introduction of super specialty courses. Establishment of Manmohan Memorial Polytechnic in Biratnagar and a polytechnic at Hetauda are other health-related projects being undertaken with Indian aid, according to the Finance Ministry of Nepal. Indian grant is used in the construction of a Dharamshala at Pashupati Temple Complex, upgradation of 26km road from Dakshinkali-Kulekhani Dam and installation of 2,700 shallow tube wells in various districts. Integrated Border Check-Posts on Indo-Nepal border areas—Raxaul-Birganj, Sunauli-Bhairahawa, Jogbani-Biratnagar and Nepalganj Road-Nepalgunj—are being constructed with Indian aid, which are expected to boost

bilateral trade. Cross-border railway links are being constructed at five locations on the Nepal-India border—Jayanagar-Bardibas, Jogbani-Biratnagar, Nautanwa-Bhairahawa, Rupaidiha-Nepalgunj and New Jalpaiguri-Kakarbhitta.

Kathmandu-Varanasi direct bus service begins⁵⁸

A regular Kathmandu-Varanasi bus service was flagged off on March 5. The Nepali registered ceremonial bus will follow the Kathmandu-Bhairahawa-Sunauli-Azamgarh-Varanasi route. The bus would be covering about 600 kms during its journey of about 12 hours. The bus service has been started under the provisions of Motor Vehicle Agreement between Nepal and India during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Nepal during the 19th SAARC Summit in November last year. Minister for Physical Infrastructure and Transport Bimalendra Nidhi and Ambassador of India to Nepal Ranjit Rae flagged off the bus service. The flag-off ceremony was conducted from a spot near Dashrath Stadium, Kathmandu.

OHCHR hails Supreme Court verdict on TRC amnesty provision⁵⁹

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein welcomed the Supreme Court's decision to strike down a clause giving the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) and the Commission on Investigation of Enforced Disappearance (CED) the power to recommend amnesty for serious human rights violations committed during the decade-long conflict (1996-2006). The Supreme Court on February 26 had annulled the amnesty provision of the transitional justice Act, saying that it is against the established principles of justice, constitutional provision, international law and the court's earlier verdicts. Responding to the appeal filed by 234 conflict victims in June 2014, the SC issued the verdict, curtailing the discretionary powers of the TRC and the CED to grant amnesty, and ending fears that perpetrators would get acquitted without trial. Earlier, the commissions could recommend amnesty to perpetrators if deemed reasonable for it, except in cases of rape and grave rights violations. On less serious crimes where amnesty is permissible, the court made it mandatory to take consent of the victims. The decision has barred the commissions from initiating reconciliation on their own without victims' consent. Over a year ago, on January 2, 2014, the Supreme Court had already stated that there could be no amnesties for serious human rights violations. Despite that ruling, the Act promulgated in May 2014 still included provisions that could have allowed the two commissions to recommend amnesty for serious human rights violations. "I welcome the government's prior commitment to abide by the Supreme Court's decision and I trust this will now be given effect," Zeid said, noting that at least 14,000 people were killed during the conflict and another 1,300 are still missing. In its latest ruling, the Supreme Court also stated that the commissions must not facilitate reconciliation between perpetrators and victims without the voluntary and informed consent of the victim.

Maoist parties unite to press government⁶⁰

The UCPN (Maoist) has formed a working alliance with five of its splinter parties including CPN-Maoist, CPN (Unified), Revolutionary Communist Party, CPN (Maoist) led by Matrika Yadav and CPN Maoist to oppose the Supreme Court

verdict that curtails the jurisdiction of the newly formed Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances to look into cases sub judice in court. A joint meeting held at the CPN-Maoist office in Buddhanagar on March 22 announced the alliance concluding that the ruling parties had breached the Comprehensive Peace Accord and the Interim Constitution by “not following the statute and the CPA in their true spirit”. The meeting also concluded that the government had backtracked on the decision to provide one million rupees to the families of those killed in the 10-year conflict. This would be Rs 500,000 in compensation and shares up to Rs 500,000 in the Upper Tamakoshi Hydropower Project. They objected to the arrest of cadres of the CPN Maoist led by Netra Bikram Chand. Former state minister Padam Rai, politburo member Ishwari Dahal (Asare Kaka) and 17 others were arrested on Friday for putting up a black flag at the residence of Radhes Pant, chief executive officer of Nepal Investment Board. They have demanded their immediate release. The meeting decided to go ahead with a nation-wide agitation programme to pressurise the government to implement the peace pacts.

Malaysian security training in Nepal is illegal: Government⁶¹

Malaysia made it mandatory for Nepali security guards to undergo one-month training from selected training centres in Kathmandu from the beginning of January. The training will incur an extra financial burden of RM600 (Rs 18,500 including tax) on aspiring workers. Objecting the system, the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) said, “Malaysia’s newly-introduced scheme to provide mandatory pre-departure training for Nepali security guards is against the law and an attempt to infringe Nepal’s rights to decide what is in the best interest of its workers at home”. “We have absolutely no problem if they upgrade the syllabus or set criteria for selection. But we cannot accept any country take hold of our internal process. We have clearly stated with the Malaysia government that they cannot decide whether or not certain training centres in Nepal are eligible to provide the training. They cannot put additional financial burden upon workers either,” said Buddhi Bahadur Khadka, MoLE spokesperson. Malaysia expects to recruit around 60,000 security guards from Nepal, according to the Security Services Association of Malaysia. It has recruited some 12,500 Nepali security guards since 2011. Nepalis are the only foreign nationals qualified to work in Malaysia as security guards.

Pakistan

Indian Foreign Secretary visits Pakistan⁶²

Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar met his Pakistani counterpart Aizaz Chaudhry in Islamabad on March 3 following his arrival in Pakistan for a two-day official visit. The primary agenda for the secretaries’ meeting was about promoting regional connectivity and trade even though both sides have an understanding about discussing bilateral matters. During the meeting, both foreign secretaries realised that peaceful dialogue is the only way forward to resolve all outstanding issues. Chaudhry drew the Indian secretary’s attention to the recent tensions at the Line of Control (LoC) and Working Boundary. Jaishankar was in Pakistan as part of a tour of SAARC countries. Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar on the first day of his two-day visit to Pakistan met the Adviser to

Prime Minister on National Security and Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz and the Special Assistant to Prime Minister Tariq Fatimi. Jaishankar also delivered a letter to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in which he reiterated Delhi's desire for cooperative relations with all neighbours. The United States has welcomed the meeting between the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan, saying their decision to resume dialogue was encouraging. State Department spokesperson Marie Harf told in a briefing that the United States "believes that both India and Pakistan stand to benefit from practical cooperation and an improved relationship".

Modi greets Sharif on Pakistan Day⁶³

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif on Pakistan Day, but the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) dampened the mood with its sharp reaction to Pakistani envoy's invitation to Hurriyat leaders to a reception at the High Commission and junior foreign minister's 'indisposed' participation in it. Prime Minister Modi in a twitter posting disclosed that he had greeted Mr Sharif on Pakistan Day. He also suggested the way forward in the relationship, saying: "It is my firm conviction that all outstanding issues can be resolved through bilateral dialogue in an atmosphere free from terror and violence." President Mamnoon Hussain, in his speech at the Pakistan Day parade, said Pakistan wanted to resolve all outstanding issues with India amicably. He emphasised that resolution of Jammu and Kashmir issue as per the aspirations of Kashmiri people and in the light of United Nations resolutions was the key to regional security and peace.

Kashmiris important stakeholders, India told⁶⁴

In a stern rejoinder to Indian External Affairs Ministry's position on the role of Kashmiris in settlement of bilateral disputes, Pakistan said on March 24 that they (Kashmiris) were important stakeholders in the process. "Kashmiris are important stakeholders as they are the ones required to exercise their right to self-determination," Foreign Office spokesperson Tasneem Aslam said in a statement. The spokesman of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Syed Akbaruddin, had earlier said in a statement: "Let me reiterate there are only two parties and there is no place for a third party in resolution of India-Pakistan issues. The only way forward to proceed on all outstanding issues is a peaceful bilateral dialogue within the framework of Simla Agreement and Lahore Declaration." The MEA issued the statement in reaction to Pakistan High Commissioner to India Abdul Basit's remarks that Indian government had no objection to his contacts with the Hurriyat leaders. Basit was then responding to media queries about Pakistan Day reception invitation to Hurriyat leaders.

57 seized boats returned to India⁶⁵

Pakistani authorities on March 21 returned 57 seized fishing boats to Indian officials at the maritime boundary. The Foreign Office said the seized boats were returned as a goodwill gesture. This is the first batch of Indian fishing vessels ever returned to India. In the past only detained fishermen were repatriated. Last year, before Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's visit to Delhi for attending Indian Premier Narendra

Modi's inauguration, the government had decided to release the Indian boats. The boats were seized by the personnel of Pakistan Maritime Security Agency (PMSA) for trespassing Pakistan's maritime boundary.

Joint military exercises with US planned⁶⁶

The United States and Pakistan will conduct a range of joint military exercises from autumn this year, the US Central Command has announced. The Centcom, which looks after US military interests in the greater Middle East region, including Pakistan, said the two countries planned more than 100 engagements and exercises. The exercises are scheduled to begin in October and will include air, land, sea and special operations. Earlier this month, Pakistani and US military representatives gathered at the Macdill Air Force Base in Florida for the 24th US-Pakistan Military Consultative Committee, an annual forum for reviewing military-to-military engagements and exercises.

Nawaz Sharif visits Saudi Arabia⁶⁷

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif went to Saudi Arabia on March 4 on a three-day visit on the 'special invitation' of King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. This was being described as the first official visit by Sharif to the kingdom since becoming prime minister in June 2013. He undertook a number of unofficial visits earlier to the kingdom, including two in January. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud emphasised the importance of Pakistan-Saudi relations and vowed to strengthen them in various fields. The two leaders held extensive talks at the King's Palace, covering bilateral relations, and regional and international issues. During the talks, the prime minister expressed the confidence that during the reign of King Salman relations between the two countries would touch new heights. The two leaders also discussed matters relating to the region and agreed that terrorism and extremism were common enemies and both nations would continue to cooperate with each other in the field of security. Sharif extended an invitation to King Salman to visit Pakistan which was accepted. Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Syed Tariq Fatemi and Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on National Affairs Irfan Siddiqui accompanied the prime minister.

Pakistan to 'help Saudi Arabia fight any threat'⁶⁸

Pakistan vowed to sternly respond to threats to Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity and said on March 26 that an assessment mission was being sent to the kingdom to examine the situation. The decision was announced after a Saudi-led coalition launched air strikes in Sana'a against Houthi militia that had deposed Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

Iran wants to hold talks on Yemen crisis⁶⁹

Iran is reported to have conveyed its concern to Pakistan over the situation in Yemen and expressed its desire to hold talks on the crisis. The Iranian proposal for a dialogue on the crisis in Yemen and Pakistan's likely participation in the Saudi-led coalition against Houthi rebels was made at a meeting between Pakistani Ambassador in Tehran Noor Mohammad Jadmani and a senior Iranian Foreign

Ministry official. The Iranian Foreign Ministry had asked the Pakistani envoy to convey Tehran's concerns over reports about Pakistan's willingness to join the military coalition cobbled by Saudi Arabia for fighting Houthis. There were allegations that Houthi rebels were being backed by Iran. But foreign office spokesperson Tasneem Aslam had dismissed such reports and said there was no available proof of Iranian involvement in Yemen. Also, Pakistan has so far not taken a decision to send troops to Yemen. During the Tehran meeting, the Iranian side indicated that it was interested in talking to Pakistan on the issue.

President visits Azerbaijan⁷⁰

President Mamnoon Hussain stressed the need for collective efforts for taking economic relations between Pakistan and Azerbaijan to new heights. Addressing the Pakistan-Azerbaijan Business Forum in Baku on March 12, the president said energy sector of Pakistan offered vast opportunities for investment and called upon Azeri investors to take advantage of it. The president noted that over a period of time, Pakistan and Azerbaijan had developed expertise in different fields which can be shared for mutual benefits. He said pharmaceutical products, surgical instruments, sports goods, defence equipment, ready-made garments, rice, fruits and seafood were some of high quality products of Pakistan awaiting effective introduction in Azeri market. He said likewise, Azerbaijan's expertise in the field of oil and gas exploration, extraction and refining could potentially bring great benefits to Pakistan. During his meeting with Prime Minister of Azerbaijan Artur Tahir Rasizade, President Hussain expressed the hope that Azerbaijan would consider investing in mega projects undertaken by the government of Pakistan, particularly in the fields of energy and infrastructure. During his meeting with Chairman of the Milli Mejlis of Azerbaijan Ogtay S. Asadov, President Hussain said road and rail infrastructure development amongst countries of the region was the key to regional integration for attaining collective socio-economic development.

The Emir of Qatar visits Pakistan⁷¹

The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani made his first official visit to Pakistan on the invitation of the prime minister on March 23. The Emir was accompanied by a high-level delegation, including members of his cabinet and the chief of Qatar Airways. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said that Pakistan held Qatar in high esteem and wanted to boost cooperation with it in all fields, particularly energy, trade, investment, defence and manpower. The prime minister said that Pakistan wanted more Qatari investment in different areas, adding that the bilateral trade of less than \$300 million per year was much below its potential. He said that Qatar was home to more than 100,000 Pakistani nationals whose remittances were making a valuable contribution to socio-economic development of the country. Pakistan would appreciate if its manpower in Qatar was substantially increased, he said. The Qatari ruler expressed interest in increasing the number of Pakistanis working for development projects his country has undertaken for hosting the 2022 Football World Cup. The two sides agreed to take measures to increase trade and strengthen cooperation in the fields of defence and manpower. The Emir said that Qatar would look into investment opportunities available in Pakistan, including those in energy sector. The two sides agreed to promote exchange of visits at

different levels to promote bilateral relations and follow the decisions taken by the two leaders. During the visit, the two countries signed an agreement on cooperation in the field of culture, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on cooperation in the field of youth and sports, on the first executive programme for cooperation in education, scientific research and the media.

Lashkar-i-Islam merges into TTP⁷²

The outlawed Lashkar-i-Islam (LI) led by Mangal Bagh has merged itself into the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) under a reorganisation planned by militants. According to a statement issued by Jamatul Ahrar spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan on March 12, the reorganised TTP would consist of members of his group, LI and the remaining of the TTP. The head of the new set-up was yet to be named, he added. The TTP disintegrated last year after a group led by Omar Khalid Khurasani based in Mohmand Agency revolted against Mulla Fazlullah and formed his own faction with the name of Jamatul Ahrar.

N-capable ballistic missile tested⁷³

Pakistan test-fired nuclear capable surface-to-surface ballistic missile Shaheen III on March 9. It is claimed that the missile has bolstered the country's deterrence capability by bringing entire India within striking range. The new missile has a range of 2,750 kilometres, which means it can reach the farthest point in India.

Govt borrows over Rs1 trillion⁷⁴

Government borrowing from scheduled banks crossed Rs1 trillion in the first eight months of this fiscal year. According to State Bank's latest report, the government borrowed Rs 1.029 trillion during July-February 2014-15 from banks, reflecting poor health of the fiscal management. During the same period last year, the government borrowed Rs 318 billion from scheduled banks for budgetary support. From the State Bank, the government last year borrowed Rs 367 billion, and during the current fiscal year, it retired Rs 434 billion of the Central Bank. In the financial year 2014, bank borrowing stood at Rs 170 billion while in the financial year 13 it was Rs 960 billion but the amount never crossed Rs.1trillion in a fiscal year.

Pakistan inflation falls to 3.24 percent in February⁷⁵

Pakistan's annual inflation fell to 3.24 percent in February from 3.96 percent in January, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics said on March 2, with the key factor being a fall in fuel prices. On a month-on-month basis, prices rose 0.92 percent in February. Average inflation in the period from July to February was 5.45 percent. Falling fuel prices and the lowering of the interest by the State Bank to a 10-year low in January resulted in the reduction in inflation. The International Monetary Fund had also predicted that the average inflation will ease to below 8 percent in fiscal year 2014-15 and fall further thereafter, as inflation expectations will be anchored by tight monetary policy and sustainable fiscal policy.

Pakistan seabed territory grows by 50,000 square kilometres⁷⁶

Pakistan's seabed territory grew by about 50,000 square kilometres (sq km) after a UN body accepted Islamabad's claim for extension of sea limits. "On 19 March

2015, United Nations' Commission on Limits of Continental Shelf (UNCLCS) completed its review and accepted Pakistan's claim for extension of its continental shelf limits, thereby extending Pakistan's sea limits from 200 nautical miles to 350 nautical miles," Pakistan Navy's media directorate said. Following the acceptance of the claim, Pakistan's offshore territory of 240,000 sq km would expand by another 50,000 sq km allowing the country to benefit from the natural resources contained in it. Pakistan had filed its case with the UNCLCS on April 30, 2009. The application was preceded by a four-year extensive study jointly conducted by the Pakistan Navy and National Institute of Oceanography under the patronage of Ministry of Science and Technology. A seven-member sub-commission of the UNCLCS evaluated Pakistan's case for a year and accepted Pakistan's claim. Some of the claimed territory overlapped Omani claim. It is believed that the verdict in favour of Pakistan was announced after successful negotiations with Oman.

Sri Lanka

Sushma Swaraj visits Sri Lanka⁷⁷

India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj went to Sri Lanka on March 6 on a two day official visit to pave way for a visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 13. During the visit, Minister Swaraj called on President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, and senior leaders of various political parties representing the Tamil and Muslim minorities. In addition to discussing agreements to be inked during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's upcoming visit, the possible resumption of ferry services between India and Sri Lanka were discussed during the bilateral meeting between Sushma Swaraj and her Sri Lankan counterpart.

Modi visits Sri Lanka⁷⁸

Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a two day state visit to Sri Lanka on March 13. This was for the first time a Prime Minister of India made a bilateral visit to the island in 27 years. Addressing the media soon after his official ceremonial welcome in the capital Colombo, Modi said that he was delighted to be in Sri Lanka and was honoured that Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena had chosen India as his first official overseas visit. Speaking on the agreements reached, the Indian Prime Minister said that Lanka IOC and Ceylon Petroleum Corporation had agreed to jointly develop the Upper Tank Farm of the China Bay Installation in the eastern province of Trincomalee on mutually agreed terms. During his bilateral discussions with President Maithripala Sirisena, Modi further said that both nations had decided to grant visas on arrivals for its citizens from April 14 as the nations wanted to encourage people to people contacts, improve connectivity, and increase tourism. He further said that Air India would soon start direct flights between New Delhi and Colombo. Speaking further, Modi stated that India is privileged to be a development partner for Sri Lanka and it will provide a fresh Line of Credit of up to US\$ 318 million for the island nation's railways sector. "This will be used to procure rolling stock, and to restore and upgrade existing railway track," he said. Speaking further on the agreements reached between the bilateral discussions held between him and President Sirisena, Modi said that the Reserve Bank of India and the Central Bank of Sri Lanka had agreed to enter into a Currency Swap Agreement of US\$ 1.5 billion. He also said that India believed that early and full implementation of the 13th Amendment and going beyond would contribute to

the reconciliation process. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, called for unity in Sri Lanka as he visited the North on March 14 during his landmark visit to the country. Speaking at the Jaffna Public library, Modi said that there needs to be unity when a country is looking to rebuild after war, and he also assured Indian assistance to develop the country. Modi reached Jaffna after visiting Anuradhapura and Talaimannar. In Jaffna, the Indian Prime Minister had talks with Northern Province Chief Minister C.V. Wigneswaran and also launched another stage of the Indian funded housing project. Modi also flagged off the first train signifying the recommencement of the Talaimannar/Medawachchiya sector of the train service to Colombo, following the rehabilitation work carried out with Indian credit assistance.

Sirisena visits China⁷⁹

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena made a state visit to China to attend the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2015, held from March 25 to 29 at the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping. President Maithripala Sirisena expressed hope that the Free Trade Agreement with China, currently under negotiations, will provide further inputs for value addition and economic cooperation in the region. Speaking at the Opening Plenary of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference in China, President Sirisena said that Sri Lanka as a maritime nation with natural ecological advantages would work in tandem with friendly countries to maintain cooperation in the maritime age. Chinese vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Liu Jainchao welcomed the Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena at the Beijing International Airport. According to media report, China said that Sri Lanka's visiting president had promised work would resume on a controversial Chinese-backed port development in Colombo that his administration had earlier suspended after problems are "sorted out. Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena and Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven held bilateral talks on the sidelines of the Boao forum on March 28.

Sri Lankan Cabinet approves the suspension of the Port City project in Colombo⁸⁰

The Sri Lankan Cabinet, on a proposal made by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, has approved to temporarily and immediately suspend the implementation of the Port City project in Colombo. The interim report submitted by committee appointed to review and submit recommendation to the cabinet sub committee on the project has noted that the project was launched and was being implemented without relevant approvals from the concerned institutions. China Communications Construction Company Limited (CCCC), the Chinese company involved in the Colombo Port City project, said that it will abide by the decision of the Cabinet to order work on the project to be suspended. Following the Cabinet's decision, China has urged Sri Lanka to respect bilateral agreements and business contracts, and protect the interests of its investors following the suspension of a multi-billion-U.S. dollar project, the Chinese Embassy said. At emergency meetings with Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe and Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera, Chinese Ambassador Yi Xianliang also asked the Sri Lankan side to cherish the results of mutually-beneficial cooperation between the two countries. Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan government has said that it attaches

great importance to relations with China and is willing to consolidate and deepen bilateral ties and cooperation in all areas.

Government allows protective work on the Colombo Port City project⁸¹

China Communications Construction Company Pvt Ltd (CCCC) says it has received written approval from the Sri Lanka Government in a letter dated March 20, 2015 by the Secretary to the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Aviation of Sri Lanka to commence protective work on the temporarily suspended Colombo Port City Project. All construction work on the Colombo Port City came to a halt following the Sri Lankan Government's official communication on March 6, 2015 to temporarily suspend ongoing work of the project, with immediate effect. As a result of the immediate suspension, over 200 meters of the breakwater constructed for the project, was damaged and the company was unable to take measures to protect the reclaimed land area. The permission to carry out protective work on the site was granted following a request made by CCCC to the Sri Lankan Government.

Sirisena meets Cameroon⁸²

President Maithripala Sirisena and British Prime Minister David Cameron held talks on March 10 in London during the President's official visit to Britain. During the meeting, Cameron had said that the United Kingdom stands ready to provide assistance and aid to achieve Sri Lanka's future development goals in any sector. Prime Minister Cameron congratulated President Maithripala on his presidential election victory and said that he is pleased to see the positive development in post-election Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka was discussed at the 28th session of the UNHRC⁸³

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini warned the Sri Lankan Government not to repeat the failures of the past. Speaking at the 28th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, after presenting his annual report, al-Husseini urged the authorities in Sri Lanka to consult deeply with the people, especially the victims, in order to design mechanisms that will work and not repeat the failures of the past. He told the UN Human Rights Council on March 5 that a report on Sri Lanka was to be presented during the ongoing session but he had recommended that the report be postponed till September. The High Commissioner said the decision was taken after serious reflection and acting upon the suggestion of the investigations group of experts. The Sri Lankan Government informed the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on March 2 that the report compiled by the team appointed by the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights to investigate the war in Sri Lanka, will be used in the domestic investigations. Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera said that the Government has already begun discussions regarding the nature of local mechanisms that should be put in place for this purpose including amendments to existing laws.

The IMF rules out a fresh bail-out for Sri Lanka⁸⁴

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) on March 4 ruled out a fresh bail-out for Sri Lanka, which had hoped to secure loans of more than US\$4.0 billion to

restructure expensive debt taken on by the previous regime. Much of the country's post-war infrastructure under the administration of former president Mahinda Rajapakse was funded with Chinese debt and the new government had hoped to retire some of those loans. Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake travelled to Washington last month to try to secure loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. But IMF experts who reviewed Sri Lanka's economy during a nine-day visit said the Indian Ocean island was not facing an immediate crisis. Delegation leader Todd Schneider said Sri Lanka's foreign reserves were comfortable compared to 2009, when it obtained a US\$2.6 billion bailout at the height of a civil war.

India releases five Sri Lankan fishing boats; Sri Lanka sets free Indian fishermen⁸⁵

Five Sri Lankan fishing boats, seized by the Indian Coast Guard personnel last year on the charge of undertaking illegal fishing in Indian waters, were released from Tuticorin based on a release order. With the aid of Coastal Security Group police, the detained boats were handed over to coast guard personnel in Tuticorin for further formalities. According to Inspector of Tuticorin Thermal Nagar Police, L. Raju, three of these Lankan boats were detained on May 20, 2014 and the other two on September 30 last year. Along with these boats, a crew of 16 Sri Lankan fishermen were also detained. But, the crew were freed on June 14 and December 22 last year, he said. Meanwhile, The Indian Coast Guard has detained six Sri Lankan fishermen on the charge of poaching into Indian waters, 128 nautical miles off Nagapattinam coast on March 6. Sri Lanka, on the other hand, set free 86 Indian fishermen on March 13 as a goodwill measure to mark the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Sri Lankan navy arrested 33 Indian fishermen and seized five boats from north of Talaimanner and 21 fishermen were arrested and 5 boats seized from the north of Kankesanthurai, both in the northern province of the island, while they were illegally fishing in Sri Lankan waters.

India objects to Ranil Wickremesinghe's comment on Indian fishermen⁸⁶

India had "strongly objected" to Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's comments justifying the killing of Indian fishermen by its navy. Making a statement after the issue was raised in the Rajya Sabha, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj said she had taken it up with Wickremesinghe. The minister said she told Wickremesinghe that the Indian fishermen released from Sri Lankan prisons in January — after a new government took office in Colombo — went through the whole legal procedure. "I said that if we justify firing, we will keep firing at each other," she added. Sushma Swaraj said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has suggested that Indian fishermen must go for deep sea fishing. Until then, a solution has to be found through a meeting between Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen.

US welcomes the release of Tamil activist⁸⁷

The United States welcomed the release by Sri Lanka's new government of a rights activist arrested a year ago for demanding information about people who went missing during the country's decades-long civil war. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the United States welcomes the March 10th release of

eight Sri Lankan detainees, including human rights activist Balendran Jeyakumari, who had been arrested under the previous administration and held without charge.

Swiss Foreign Minister visits Colombo⁸⁸

Swiss Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter says Switzerland is willing to open a new chapter in bilateral relations with Sri Lanka following presidential elections in January. On a visit to Colombo on March 17, Burkhalter praised the new Sri Lankan Government for its political reforms and its reconciliation efforts with ethnic minorities in the country. In talks with President Maithripala Sirisena and other top government representatives Burkhalter also discussed possibilities of boosting bilateral trade between Sri Lanka and Switzerland.

Sarath Fonseka receives the highest rank of 'Field Marshal'⁸⁹

President Maithripala Sirisena awarded former Army Commander Sarath Fonseka with the highest rank of 'Field Marshal'. General Fonseka is the first military officer to receive such a rank in the island nation's history. General Sarath Fonseka was awarded the highest military rank for the service rendered by him, achieving the victory over terrorism, the government said.

Government expands the Cabinet⁹⁰

More cabinet and state Ministers were appointed by President Maithripala Sirisena on March 22 and this included several Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) members. The President's office said that 11 Parliamentarians took oaths as cabinet Ministers, 5 as State Ministers and 10 Deputy Ministers.

Government releases land in the north⁹¹

The Sri Lankan government released 425 acres of land previously situated in Jaffna high security zone to the original owners at a ceremony held at the Walalai area in Jaffna on March 23 with President Maithripala Sirisena presiding. At the event, the President symbolically presented the ownership certificates to the rightful owners of the land. 284 acres of land in the Walalai area and 181 acres of land within the Telippalai area were handed back to the owners. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, and Governor of Northern Province H.M.G.S. Palihakkara were also present at this occasion.

India-Sri Lanka fishermen level talk concludes on a positive note⁹²

The talks between Sri Lankan and Indian fishermen held in Chennai on March 24 ended on a positive note with the Indian fishers agreeing to abandon trawling in the Palk Strait in three years time. Tamil Nadu fishermen leaders, who attended the meeting, said the state government had sanctioned Rs 52 crore to convert trawl boats into deep sea fishing vessels and that they had sought a further assistance of Rs 975 crore from the central government for the purpose. In course of time, the entire trawl fleet from Indian side would be turned into deep sea fishing vessels. The Indian fishermen sought 83 fishing days in a year to fish in the Palk Strait during this three-year period. The fishermen also assured their Sri Lankan

counterparts that they would not use pair trawling and purse seine nets. They agreed that Indian country boats would not use mono filament nets in the Palk Strait. After the talks, T. Sathasivam, a fishermen representative from Sri Lanka, told reporters that they would present the resolutions of the meeting for the approval of the fishers in their country. The Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development Ministry of Sri Lanka however, denied the existence of an agreement with Indian fishermen to allow them to fish in Sri Lankan waters for 83 days of the year for the next three years. Several proposals had been made by the Indian fishing community asking for permission to fish in the Sri Lankan waters but the Ministry said it had not agreed to any such agreement.

Bilateral discussion held between the Emir of Qatar and the President of Sri Lanka⁹³

The Emir of the State of Qatar Sheikh Tamimi bin Hamad Al Thani and President Maithripala Sirisena agreed that there is immense potential for bilateral cooperation between the two countries. They identified the areas such as trade and commerce, investment, power and energy, gas and oil exploration, tourism and sports for future close cooperation between the two nations. President Sirisena and the visiting Emir of Qatar held bilateral discussions at the Presidential Secretariat on March 24. After the initial discussions between the two leaders, two delegation that included ministers of foreign affairs, finance, power and energy, tourism, civil aviation and sports held details discussions on ways and means of expanding cooperation between the two countries. President Sirisena urged the Emir of Qatar to take welfare measures for the benefit of over 125,000 Sri Lankans employed in Doha-Qatar.

RBI signs currency swap agreement with Central Bank of Sri Lanka⁹⁴

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) signed a US\$ 400 million Currency Swap Agreement with the Central Bank of Sri Lanka on March 25. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka can make drawals of US Dollar or Euro in multiple tranches up to a maximum of US\$ 400 million or its equivalent, RBI said in a release. The agreement, which will be valid for a period of three years from the date of signing, is expected to further economic co-operation between the two countries, it added.

Trade delegation of European Union visits Sri Lanka⁹⁵

The government of Sri Lanka has commenced the formal process to regain the EU's GSP Plus trade facility under the Union's new GSP regulation. A high level trade delegation of European Union came to Sri Lanka on March 23 to commence discussions on regaining the EU's GSP Plus trade concession. A joint statement by Sri Lanka and the EU said the EU-Sri Lanka Working Group on Trade and Economic Cooperation met in Colombo on March 24. In the meeting, Sri Lanka and the EU discussed issues related to promoting bilateral trade and investment. In particular they started the process that may lead to the re-admission of Sri Lanka to the status of GSP+ under the European Union's new GSP regulation. They also discussed bilateral matters related to investment facilities, import duties and fishery exports from Sri Lanka to the EU.

Julie Bishop meets Tamil Diaspora⁹⁶

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop had talks with the Tamil diaspora and the Tamil National Alliance on the latest developments in Sri Lanka. The Foreign Minister said that she had a good meeting on Sri Lanka and it included ways Australia will support reconciliation efforts in the country. Tamil National Alliance leader M.A. Sumanthiran and Global Tamil Forum (GTF) spokesman Suren Surendiran were among those who attended the meeting.

UN Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence visits Sri Lanka⁹⁷

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence, Pablo de Greiff arrived in Sri Lanka on March 29, for a six-day visit on an invitation of the Sri Lankan government. The Special Rapporteur was in Sri Lanka on an "exploratory visit and for consultations." Pablo de Greiff is the first UN official to visit the country since the new government of President Maithripala Sirisena took over in January.

Russian ships visits port of Colombo⁹⁸

Sri Lanka Navy, in accordance with naval traditions, ceremonially welcomed three Russian naval ships of the Pacific Fleet "Admiral Panteleev", "Pechenga" and "SB-522", arrived at the Port of Colombo for replenishment and crews' relaxation on March 28. The Commander of the war ship squadron, Captain 1st Rank Alexander V. Potapov and commanders of the ships accompanied by the Ambassador and the Military Attaché of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Sri Lanka paid a courtesy call on the Deputy Area Commander of the Western Naval Area, Commodore Kassapa Paul, at the Western Naval Command Headquarters in Colombo. They held cordial discussions on the matters of mutual interest and exchanged mementos as a gesture of goodwill.

Sri Lankan delegation visits Moscow⁹⁹

Given that the Russian economy is strangling with economic embargoes that has resulted in the currency depreciation by almost one hundred percent and Russian arrivals to Sri Lanka plunging by 32 percent, Sri Lanka tourism went on to invest in the market with strong brand building with focused relationship with key travel agents and tour operators at the key Russian fair MIIT that was staged in Moscow in the last week of March. The Sri Lanka delegation was led by the Managing Director Milanka Gajanayaka. A total of 11 leading tour operators participated at the MIIT this year including Cinnamon Hotels and Resorts, Aitken Spence Travels, Deluxe Vacations (Pvt) Ltd., Delux Holidays (Pvt) Ltd., Pigion Island Resort, Long Beach Resort & Spa, Connaissance De Ceylon, Exotic Holiday International (Pvt) Ltd, Bernard Tours (Pvt) Limited., Green Holiday Center (Pvt) Ltd and Concord Exotic Voyages Lanka (Pvt) Ltd.

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