

SOUTH ASIA TRENDS

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



Compiled & Edited by
Gulbin Sultana

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

Editor's Note

The first month of the year 2016 witnessed violent attacks in South Asia—attack on Indian Air Force base in Pathankot, Indian Consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif, Pakistani Consulate in Jalalabad and Bacha Kan University in Pakistan. These terrorist attacks were vehemently condemned and countries in the region reiterated their support to combat terrorism. Following the Pathankot attack, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif assured Prime Minister Modi that his country would not hesitate “to take prompt and decisive action” if the involvement of Pakistan-based elements in the attack was proved beyond doubt.

Pakistan believes that certain terrorist elements are using Afghan soil. Realising the urgency to revive peace negotiations with Taliban, Pakistan facilitated a four country talks to prepare a “roadmap towards initiating peace talks”.

A diplomatic tension is going on between Pakistan and Bangladesh since December 2015 when Pakistan was asked to withdraw one of its senior diplomats from Bangladesh for her alleged involvement in terror financing. As a counter action, Pakistan in January asked Bangladesh to withdraw one of its senior diplomats from its mission in Pakistan without citing any reason.

In order to deal with the political crisis, Nepal Parliament endorsed the first amendment to the newly promulgated constitution. However, the Madhesi, who led the protest against some of the provisions of the new constitutions, rejected the amendments saying they are not enough to meet their demands.

On the first anniversary of Sri Lanka's political transition, national unity government got accolades from the world community for its commitment to establish durable peace, stability and prosperity in the country. To fulfil its commitment to a broader reform agenda, Sri Lankan Government proposed for the appointment of a Constitutional Assembly in the Parliament to formulate a new constitution.

Maldivian Government permitted former President Mohamed Nasheed to travel to the UK for medical treatment. It is believed that government allowed him to leave the country under international pressure; however, the foreign ministry rejected the allegation saying he was allowed to go after he sent a written request to the government.

Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay visited Kolkata to attend *the Global Business Summit*, where he urged the Indian businessmen to exploit the business opportunity provided by his country.

In addition to all these, several other political and economic developments in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in the month of January are outlined in this issue.

Afghanistan

Attack on Indian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif¹

The Indian consulate in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif came under attack on January 3. After almost 24 hours of resistance the Afghan national security forces eliminated all four terrorists who attacked the consulate. The provincial government media office said the operation was jointly conducted by the special forces of the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army under the supervision of acting governor Gen. Ata Mohammad Noor. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on January 4 asserted that India would always stand with the people of Afghanistan notwithstanding the terror attack on Indian Consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif as President Ashraf Ghani called him up to brief him on the incident. Ghani strongly condemned the “cross-border” terrorist attack in Pathankot and extended condolences at the loss of lives in it. India’s Ambassador to Kabul, Amar Sinha, who visited Mazar-e-Sharif on January 5, also said that such attacks will not affect relations between the two countries but will instead strengthen ties between Afghanistan and India. During his visit, the ambassador praised security forces for their efforts to eliminate the attackers and said that those responsible for the attack are opposed to the friendship between Afghanistan and India.

Taliban claims control over 34 districts in Afghanistan²

The Taliban says it seized control of 34 of Afghanistan’s nearly 400 districts during fighting in 2015 and that most of them remain under its control. “Over the past 14 years, 2015 can be labelled as one of the most successful and inspiring jihadi year, which was fraught with numerous significant and sometimes unanticipated achievements in its fold,” said a Taliban statement, titled “A review of Jihadi Progress in 2015,” that was sent to reporters on January 2, 2016. It says the Taliban-controlled districts are located in 17 of the country’s 34 provinces, including Farah, Badghis, Ghor, Panjsher, Badakhshan, Baghlan, Helmand, Heart Kunduz, Nuristan, Saripul, Paktika, Takhar, Logar, Jawzjan, Faryab, Kandahar and Ghazni. The Taliban described its temporary capture of the key northern Afghan city of Kunduz in September as “the most significant incident of the year.” The Afghan government has not yet commented on the insurgent claims. Meanwhile, local officials say more than 300 schools are under Taliban’s control in northern Kunduz province, where the insurgents recruit students for fighting. However, the militant group vehemently denies recruiting schoolchildren as fighters. It says children’s recruitment as fighters is forbidden under Taliban’s policy and the Islamic Shariah.

Afghan security forces intensify operations against the ISIS³

The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have intensified air and ground operations against the loyal to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist group in eastern Nangarhar province as the loyalists of the terror group are attempting to expand foothold in the country. The Afghan National Army (ANA) Deputy Chief of Staff Gen. Murad Ali Murad said the Afghan forces have inflicted major casualties to the fanatics of ISIS terror group in Nangarhar, particularly in Achin district. President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani ordered the Ministry of Defense (MoD) to continue bombing the fanatics of the ISIS. During his speech at the gathering organised in Jalalabad for the assessment of security situation and

development the President said that Daesh does not have room in Afghanistan.

Four nations call on Taliban to join peace talks⁴

Representatives from four countries gathered in Kabul on January 19, called on the Taliban to resume peace talks with the Afghan government. Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, the US Ambassador to Afghanistan Michael McKinley and China's Special Envoy for Afghanistan Ambassador Deng Xijun met at the Presidential Palace amid tight security, a week after a first round of discussions in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. In a joint statement released by the Afghan Foreign Ministry, said the talks "made progress on a roadmap toward initiating peace talks with Taliban groups". The insurgents are not represented at the talks. The High Peace Council (HPC) called as "satisfactory" the outcome from the second quadrilateral meeting on the Afghan peace process in Kabul.

US Congress delegation visits Afghanistan⁵

During a meeting with the US Congress delegation led by Senator Bob Corker, President Ashraf Ghani said Afghanistan needs to complete the inventory of its Air Force by acquiring aircraft and helicopters, urging the US Congress delegation to assist Afghanistan in this process. Finance Minister Eklil Hakimi also met the US Senate delegation led by Bob Corker at the Presidential Palace. US Ambassador to Afghanistan P. Michael McKinley and other officials also participated in the meeting.

Afghan CEO visits Iran⁶

Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah on January 4 has reached Tehran for an official three-day visit. He is the second senior Afghan official who paid a visit to Tehran over the past year. Abdullah Abdullah met Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, on January 5. During the meeting between Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and Afghan CEO Abdullah Abdullah in Tehran on January 5, the two officials consulted on the latest developments in bilateral relations and the region, and underlined the necessity for more effective cooperation in fight against terrorism and extremism. Zarif also stressed Iran's support for the Afghan government's efforts to establish security and move towards peace within the framework of all-inclusive talks among all Afghan groups. He also underscored the necessity for the implementation of all the agreements signed between the two countries in the past. Iranian Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli in a meeting with Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah in Tehran on January 7 underlined the need for the further expansion of mutual cooperation between the two countries. Abdullah Abdullah met President Hassan on January 5. Rouhani said after his meeting with Abdullah that Iran is committed to expanding Kabul-Tehran ties and to lend its support to peace and stability in Afghanistan. In addition, Abdullah met with the Chairman of Iran's Commerce, Economic and Industrial Coordination Council, Akbar Tarkan. Abdullah and Tarkan discussed ways to expand economic cooperation between the two countries. Tarkan said that they have paved the ground for foreign investments in Iran. He added that

despite Chabahar, there were 28 other ports in the country. He hoped that Afghan traders would avail the opportunity to invest in Iranian ports. Abdullah said that Chabahar port was of great economic importance for Afghanistan. The head of Chabahar free trade zone, Hamid Ali Mubarak, said that some of the Afghan companies will jointly invest in the port along with Iranian investors. "Up to now, at least 110 Afghan and Afghan-Iranian companies have registered to invest in Chabahar Port and most of them have started work in the area," he said.

Afghanistan concerns over Saudi-Iran diplomatic tensions⁷

The Afghan Government has expressed concerns over the recent diplomatic tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, said Presidential Palace in a statement on January 8, 2016. "Afghanistan believes that neither the two Islamic countries nor the region or the world benefit from the existing situation. Thus Afghanistan requests the two brotherly countries to resolve any disputes with talks and prevent further escalation of tensions," said the statement.

President Ghani attends the World Economic Forum in Davos⁸

After attending the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland, President Ashraf Ghani returned home on January 23, the Presidential Palace said. On the sidelines of the WEF on its second day, Ghani met US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, and his spouse Melinda Gates. The president also met International Monetary Fund (IMF) Chief Executive Officer Christine Lagarde and top officials of Google. Ghani discussed the economic development of Afghanistan, peace and stability, support for Afghan security and defence forces and joint anti-terrorism efforts with his interlocutors. Besides attending the forum, the president also participated in the meeting "the global security outlook". Carter and the NATO chief also attended the event. Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook said on January 22, "in their meeting, Carter and Ghani discussed the ongoing mission to train, advise and assist the Afghan forces as they confront the Taliban, secure their country and work closely with the US to prevent terrorist groups from using Afghanistan as a safe haven."

Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani visits China⁹

Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani was on a four-day official visit to China at the invitation of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Lasting from January 25 to 28, this was his first China visit since taking office. The two foreign ministers discussed the development of China-Afghanistan relations in the meeting. Wang said China was ready to strengthen cooperation, especially in development and security, to promote the strategic partnership of cooperation. Calling China a close friend of Afghanistan, Rabbani thanked China for its "important and constructive role" in the peace and reconstruction process. He said his nation was willing to join the Belt and Road initiative to promote regional intercommunication and common prosperity. Afghanistan hopes to become a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. China said it welcomes the requests. Vice President Li Yuanchao also met Rabbani.

Power plants in Afghanistan go operational¹⁰

Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), the Indian government-owned power plant equipment maker better-known as BHEL, has thrown the switch on two substations in energy-starved Afghanistan. The 220/20 kilovolt substations will provide power to Charikar and Doshi regions. Charikar is around 60km from greater Kabul, and Doshi is about 150km from the capital. Inaugurated by Afghanistan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah and Indian Ambassador Amar Sinha, the substations are part of a 220-kilovolt transmission line between the northern city of Phul e-Khumri and Kabul.

Ahadi launches new party¹¹

The New National Front of Afghanistan (NNF), officially launched as an opposition party on January 14, claims the National Unity Government (NUG) has failed in all areas. It stressed that elections should be held as soon as possible so as to replace the current government. Speaking at the launch, Anwar ul-Haq Ahadi, the chairman of the new party, said that all activities of the NUG are against national interests. He said he regrets having supported the NUG leaders during the 2014 presidential elections and said people should not have to be victims of political games of the NUG leaders— President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah. The new party is the second political party after the National Congress Party, led by Abdul Latif Pedram, to take on an opposition role. Ahadi served as finance minister under ex-president Hamid Karzai and supported Ghani during his pre-election campaign in 2014.

Ex-Jihadis form new party¹²

A newly-created political foundation of former jihadi figures has decided to make efforts at brokering peace talks between the government and the Taliban. The creation of the new party ‘Grand Council of Afghanistan Mujahideen’ was announced on January 24 in southeastern Khost province. The council’s head, Mulavi Mohammad Sardar Zadran, said they wanted to strengthen their relations with the Taliban in order encourage them for peace talks with the government. Zadran asked Taliban militants to shun insurgency and reconcile with the government for the sake of Afghanistan’s development.

WB to provide \$128 million grant for Naghlu Dam, water management¹³

The World Bank (WB) would provide \$128 million in aid grant to Afghanistan for water management and reconstruction of the Naghlu dam under agreements signed on January 24 in Kabul. The contracts were signed between WB country director in Afghanistan and the Afghan finance and agriculture ministers and the head of Da Afghanistan Breshna Shirkat in Kabul. Up to \$45 million would be spent on the project of on-farm water management while the rest (\$83 million) would be spent on the reconstruction of the Naghlu dam in Kabul. Finance Minister Eklil Hakimi said the hydropower dam had the capacity to produce 96 megawatts of power but the capacity would be increased to 75 MW after the completion of the schemes.

Europe must not forcibly expel Afghan refugees: CEO¹⁴

Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah has renewed his call on European countries not to forcibly expel Afghan refugees. A statement from the CEO's office said Abdullah made the appeal during a meeting with Lowrnt Mishel, EU's refugee and protection affairs head, during a meeting on January 27. The CEO and the EU diplomat discussed Afghan refugees' problems in Europe and solutions to them, the statement said. Abdullah said Afghanistan hoped the EU would consider the Geneva Convention on refugees' rights.

UN Seeks \$393 million for Afghan humanitarian aid¹⁵

The United Nations launched an appeal for \$393 million in humanitarian assistance to conflict-torn Afghanistan this year to meet "the acute life-saving" needs of millions of vulnerable people across the country on January 27. According to Mark Bowden, the U.N. Humanitarian Coordinator, support related to food, health care, nutrition, safe water and sanitation will reach an estimated 3.5 million people under the 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Afghanistan. Bowden spoke while launching the appeal together with Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah in Kabul. Bowden said he anticipated an increase in conflict-driven humanitarian needs. Chief Executive Abdullah said the government is hopeful donor nations will match commitments of previous years to assist and support the needs of the Afghan community.

Afghanistan 3rd most corrupt country: TI¹⁶

In the Transparency International's (TI) annual Corruption Perceptions Index for 2015, Afghanistan has been listed the third most corrupt country in the world. Millions of dollars that should have been spent on Afghanistan's reconstruction have been wasted or stolen, seriously undermining efforts to restore peace, the organisation said. In its report, the influential global watchdog alleged that child labour remained a sad reality in an environment where citizens were trapped in poverty while corrupt officials were paid off. Human trafficking, child mortality, poor education standards, environmental destruction and terrorism were identified as other causes of the devastation fuelled by corruption.

Bangladesh

Rally organised by both the AL and the BNP on the anniversary of January 5 general elections¹⁷

Addressing a massive rally on the occasion of the second anniversary of January 5 general election, which Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) marks as "death of democracy day", the BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia demanded discussions with the government for the sake of democracy. She demanded the authorities to immediately arrange a parliamentary election under a nonpartisan government. The BNP chief demanded resignation of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmed. The rally was the first public rally for Khaleda Zia in over a year. The BNP chief last addressed a public rally on December 13, 2014 at Kanchpur in Narayanganj as part of her party's move to force the government for holding the last national election under a non-party administration. Awami League (AL) also organised a rally marking the "victory day for democracy" on the second anniversary of January 5 elections.

Pakistan asks Bangladesh to recall diplomat¹⁸

Pakistan has asked Bangladesh to withdraw its senior diplomat Moushumi Rahman from the country in 48 hours, without citing any reason. The move appears to be a counter-action from Islamabad following the withdrawal of its diplomat Farina Arshad from Dhaka on December 23, 2015 after she was accused of terror financing. On January 5, 2016, the Pakistan foreign ministry summoned Bangladesh High Commissioner to Pakistan Suhrab Hossain and conveyed the message. Moushumi is the counsellor (political) and head of Chancery at the Bangladesh mission in Islamabad. Dhaka, however, will not bring her back and instead will send her to its diplomatic mission in another country.

Bangladesh voices 'concern' over North Korea's nuclear test¹⁹

Bangladesh expressed its concern over a nuclear test carried out by North Korea. Dhaka in a statement reminded Pyongyang that the nuclear test was in contravention to the UN Security Council Resolutions No. 1718, 1874, 2087 and 2094 and the non-proliferation regime. It also urged North Korea to refrain from activities that could potentially escalate tension, and to reaffirm its commitment to the maintenance of peace and stability of the region and beyond. Bangladesh was committed to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament as a signatory of international treaties, the statement said.

Bangladesh foreign minister visits Saudi Arabia²⁰

Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali paid a three-day visit to Saudi Arabia from January 5-7. During the visit, A.H. Mahmood Ali, met his Saudi counterpart Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir in Riyadh on January 6. Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia have expressed their firm resolve to cooperate in the fight against terrorism and extremism through meaningful cooperation, during the meeting. However, neither of the governments released any details on how they would cooperate to combat terrorism. The press release said the two foreign ministers reviewed "the whole gamut of bilateral relations between the two countries as well as exchanged views on regional and international issues of mutual interest, including mutual cooperation at the UN and other international fora, including the OIC". It said both the ministers "agreed to work on a number of instruments for cooperation on investment, culture and education, agriculture etc" ahead of the probable visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina so that "those could be signed during the visit". The two ministers also agreed to sign an MOU on Foreign Office Consultation (FOC) between the two countries during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to the Kingdom sometime between March and May. Saudi deputy foreign ministers of different divisions were present at the bilateral meeting. From the Bangladesh side Ambassador Golam Moshi, Deputy Chief of Mission Nazrul Islam, Consul General of the Bangladesh consulate in Jeddah Shahidul Karim, and Director of the Foreign Minister's Office Asif Rahman were present. Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali also met with Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Secretary General Iyad Ameen Madani on January 7 in Jeddah. During the meeting, Bangladesh offered its readiness to extend full support to the cause of Muslim Ummah where OIC has been engaged. In reply, the secretary general reaffirmed the OIC's interest to continue its engagement with Bangladesh to

enhance peace and development as well as political stability across the Muslim world. During the meeting, they also discussed issues of common interest of the member states of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation with special focus on the issue of plight of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

Saudi Prince meets Khaleda²¹

Saudi Prince Turki bin Abdullah Aziz Al Saud and his brother Prince Badar bin Abdullah met Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson Khaleda Zia on January 12. President of Islamic Development Bank (IDB) Dr. Ahmad Mohamed Ali Al-Madani and Saudi Ambassador in Dhaka Abdullah H.M. Al-Mutairi and BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, among others, were present at the meeting. However, there was no formal briefing about the outcome of the meeting.

Bangladesh endorses OIC statement condemning attacks on Saudi missions in Iran²²

Bangladesh has endorsed an Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) joint communiqué condemning Iran's "aggressions" against the Saudi diplomatic missions and Tehran's "continued support for terrorism" in the region. The communiqué was adopted at an "extraordinary" meeting of OIC ministers held in Jeddah on January 21 following Saudi Arabia's request. Foreign Minister Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali attended the meeting held to discuss the situation arising from attacks on Saudi Arabia's diplomatic missions in Iran. Bangladesh had condemned such attacks, saying they were in "clear violation" of the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations. Meanwhile, Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Ali discussed a range of bilateral issues with his Indonesian counterpart on the sidelines of the OIC meet.

Bangladesh detains Singapore deportees over terror links²³

Bangladesh authorities say 14 of its nationals deported from Singapore are being held over links to a group blamed for attacking secular writers. The men were part of a larger group of 26 construction workers who were expelled from Singapore last year for supporting armed jihadist ideology. On January 21, Bangladeshi police confirmed they had arrested all of the deportees when they first arrived home on December 21, 2015. They released some after finding no evidence against them, but continued to detain 14 after uncovering links to Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), a group that has been blamed for attacks on secular bloggers, authorities said. The released deportees have been put under police surveillance. Singapore said members of the group had been contemplating taking part in armed jihad in Middle East as well as in Bangladesh against the government.

Home Minister addresses the Assembly of the UN Trusteeship Council²⁴

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan at an assembly of the United Nations Trusteeship Council in New York on January 15 said Bangladesh government has taken a zero tolerance policy to combat extremism and terrorism. He shared various measures, taken by Bangladesh with the participation and cooperation of women, civil society, religious leaders, local elite, grassroots people and media, for combating

extremism. He also reaffirmed Dhaka's commitment to provide all-out cooperation in curbing extremism and terrorism at both regional and international levels. Khan also inaugurated the services of Machine Readable Passport (MRP) and Machine Readable Visa (MRV) at Consulate General offices of Bangladesh in Mexico and New York.

Bangladeshi killed in BSF shooting²⁵

Members of Indian Border Security Force (BSF) shot dead a Bangladesh national near the Borogram border in Dinajpur on December 31, 2015, according to Bangladesh media. Lt Col Korban Ali, commanding officer of Border Guard of Bangladesh (BGB)-29 Battalion in Phulbari, said the BSF men of Elenbari camp under 41 BSF Battalion in Dakkhin Dinajpur of West Bengal shot Mohammad Nuruzzaman as he entered the Indian territory, leaving him critically injured. Nuruzzaman was taken to a local hospital in Dakkhin Dinajpur where he died. BGB officials strongly protested the incident and called for a flag meeting. They also urged their Indian counterpart to return the body as soon as possible. At least four Bangladesh nationals were killed in Dinajpur by BSF men in 2015. Of them, two were killed in April and two others in December, according to BGB officials.

BGB-BSF flag meeting held²⁶

A battalion commander-level flag meeting between Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and Indian Border Security Force (BSF) was held at Tukergram in India on January 23. Shah Alam Chowdhury, commander of BGB 41 Battalion, led the BGB team, while Biresh Kumar Singh, commander of BSF 131 Battalion, represented the BSF side. The staff officers and company camp commanders of both sides were also present at the meeting. Sources said the meeting was held in a cordial atmosphere. The two sides discussed different border issues, including smuggling.

Tripura opens new land customs station along Bangladesh border²⁷

A new land customs station has been opened in Tripura along Bangladesh-India border to facilitate two-way trade. Indian Minister of State for Commerce and Industry Nirmala Sitharaman along with Chief Minister of Tripura Manik Sarkar inaugurated the station on January 6, 2016 at Srimantapur. This station is located at Sonamura in Sepahijala district of Tripura. The corresponding station on the Bangladesh side is Bibirbazar, Chittagong Commissionerate. Srimantapur is the second land customs station developed by Tripura government along Bangladesh border.

Bangladesh for joint river basin management: High Commissioner Ali²⁸

Bangladesh is eager to solve water-sharing problems with India through the joint management of common river basins, Bangladesh High Commissioner to India Syed Muazzem Ali said on the sidelines of the 26th Tripura State Industry and Commerce Fair in Agartala on January 30, 2016.

India's BHEL gets Rampal contract²⁹

Indian power company Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) has been selected to construct the 1,320-megawatt coal power plant in Rampal close to the

Sundarbans. The Bangladesh-India Friendship Company has chosen BHEL out of three bidders and issued it with a notification award for the \$1.5 billion job. BHEL would have to arrange the finance from the Indian Exim Bank on behalf of the Friendship company. Of this finance, \$1.39 billion will be in foreign currency and another \$101 million in local currency. The Friendship company will fund 30 per cent of the project cost and the rest comes in the form of loans.

President seeks more South Korean investment³⁰

President Abdul Hamid in a meeting with visiting Deputy Speaker of South Korea Jeong Kab Yoon at Bangabhaban on January 17, sought more Korean investment in Bangladesh, and urged Korea to increase its import from Bangladesh. President Hamid also stressed exchanging visits at different levels, including public and private ones, for further strengthening the existing bilateral relations.

Government to export raw jute to Nepal: Tofail Ahmed³¹

"The government of Bangladesh will export raw jute to Nepal as jute millers of the Himalayan nation have urged Bangladesh to help save their local industry", Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed said on January 24. There has been a ban on export of raw jute from Bangladesh since November 2, 2015. The government of Bangladesh had to impose the ban as demand for raw jute increased in the country after the implementation of the Mandatory Jute Packaging Act 2010. However, first vice-president of the Chamber of Industries, Morang in Nepal said that the jute industry in Nepal is largely dependent on raw jute from Bangladesh and India. Twelve big jute mills that employed 20,000 workers in Nepal are about to suspend their production due to a lack of raw jute supplies from Bangladesh and India.

Dhaka court sentenced death penalty to two of the killers of blogger Abhijeet³²

A Dhaka court handed down death penalty to two people and different jail terms to six others, including the chief of banned Islamist outfit Ansarullah Bangla Team, on December 31, for the killing of blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider almost three years ago. Gonojagoron Mancha, of which Rajib was a key organiser, rejected the judgment and called for protests as even though five were confessed to the killing of the blogger they were not given death penalty.

Major progress in workers' safety³³

The US, Canada, the European Union and the International Labour Organisation said Bangladesh made a remarkable progress in workplace safety over the last two and a half years, but it needed to improve labour rights. "We [the Sustainability Compact Partners] made a remarkable progress in workplace safety, fire, remediation, electrical and structural safety. That is undisputed," said Michael J Delaney, assistant trade representative of the US for South Asia, at the second Sustainability Compact meeting at Westin Hotel in Dhaka on January 27. "But less progress has been made in workers' rights and trade union registration," Delaney told a joint press conference after the meeting.

Bhutan

Bangladesh 13th most corrupt: Transparency International³⁴

Bangladesh slipped one notch to rank the 13th most corrupt country in the world in 2015, according to the global corruption index of Transparency International. The country slid one position from the bottom in the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) though its score remained unchanged at 25 out of 100 as in 2014, shows the CPI 2015 released globally by the Berlin-based graft watchdog on January 27.

Prime Minister Tobgay visits Kolkata³⁵

Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay made a four-day visit to Kolkata on January 6. The Prime Minister met Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on the same day. Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay met West Bengal Governor Keshari Nath Tripathi on January 7, and conveyed to the governor that Bhutan attaches high importance to its relations with West Bengal. The Prime Minister's delegation also visited Dakhineswar and Kalighat temples in the city. Addressing the Global Business Summit on January 8 in Kolkata, Lyonchoen Tshering Tobgay said Bhutan has the required environment to do business. "We have an educated workforce, a stable political environment and above all, a free trade agreement with India to ensure smooth commerce," Lyonchoen who was the chief guest said. Bhutan, he said can supply cheap and clean energy to power Bengal's industries.

Government of India releases Nu 1.99 billion³⁶

After waiting for more than a year and having pre-financed the north east-west highway, the government of India handed over two cheques amounting to Nu 1.99 billion to the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) on January 14. Of the total, Nu 1.24 billion is on the account of project tied assistance (PTA), under which the highway widening works are being executed. The remaining Nu 751.76 million pertains to small development project (SDP). Specifically, the activities include reconstruction of Wangduephodrang Dzong, four different segments of east-west highway, spill overs from expansion of Paro airport, urban infrastructure development in Kanglung, conservation of Phajoding Lhakhang and development of infrastructure and teaching facilities in three colleges and institute. Part of the fund was also sanctioned as the first instalment of 3rd batch of the SDP. Government of India, as per the press release from GNHC has committed Nu 45 billion in the 11th Plan. PTA financing comes to about Nu 28 billion in the entire plan and as of date, India released Nu 10.35 billion. India also committed Nu 8.5 billion as Program Grant (PG) and another Nu 8.5 billion for the SDP during the planned period. So far, the country received Nu 4.25 billion of Program Grant and Nu 2.97 billion for SDP. India has released Nu 17.57 billion, working out to 39.06 per cent of total committed allocation in the 11th Five Year Plan.

Bhutan condemns terrorist attack in Punjab³⁷

Bhutan condemned the terror attack on Pathankot Airbase in Punjab, India, on January 2. A press release from the foreign ministry states that Bhutan was deeply concerned by the terror attack on Pathankot Airbase. "The government and the people of Bhutan express their solidarity with the government and people of India. Bhutan also extends our heartfelt sympathies to the families who have lost loved ones," it states. Condemning the terrorist act, it stated that no cause or grievance

justifies such heinous crimes. "While the government of India and its security forces responded swiftly and contained the situation, the international community must renew their collective efforts to root out terrorism in all its forms and manifestations," the press release states.

Domestic inflation overtakes imported³⁸

Food price in Bhutan increased by 3.19 per cent during November 2014 and November 2015. The country's inflation rate is always associated to the inflation in India because it portrayed a similar trend. The basis is that the country imported almost 90 per cent of commodities from India, including the inflationary trends. However, the trend seems to be changing now. The National Statistical Bureau's (NSB) consumer price index revealed that the price of goods and services between November 2014 and November 2015 increased by 3.59 per cent. But the prices of imported goods increased by 2.69 per cent and imported goods increased by 4.60 per cent. This means that more than 60 per cent of the inflation is homegrown. Even in October, the prices of domestic goods and services increased by 4.74 per cent and imported goods increased by 2.51 per cent.

Working together against a common enemy³⁹

In an attempt to curb corruption, the Bangladesh Anti Corruption Commission and the Anti-Corruption of Bhutan would work together in future. The former is also considering signing a memorandum of understanding with its counterpart in Bhutan. Bangladesh ACC chairperson Md. Badiuzzaman, who was on his first visit to the country, said signing of memorandum of understanding would help nations to share best practices and combat the social malaise. The seven-member delegation from Bangladesh was in Bhutan for a five-day study visit to share best practices, raise awareness about the challenges in tackling corruption, and build regional ties. This is the sixth delegation the commission has received from its counter parts since 2010.

Bangladeshi firm to build government's e-procurement system⁴⁰

A Bangladeshi software firm won the contract to develop an electronic government procurement (e-GP) system worth US\$ 159,500 for the government of Bhutan. Dohatec New Media, which also developed the same system for the Bangladesh government, will be working with local company, New Edge Technologies. The government is developing the e-GP system to promote transparency and efficiency in the public procurement system.

ADB to finance Nyera-Amari projects with US\$ 320 million⁴¹

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) would finance the 442-megawatt (MW) Nyera-Amari hydropower project with US\$ 320million. The project will be developed on a multi-tranche financing modality. The proposed financing modality will support development of runoff the river hydropower plan and transmission system for power export from eastern region. The project is envisaged in two stages with two separate plant facilities in a cascading manner- one powerhouses generating 125MW would be located near Gomdar, the second powerhouse with 317MW capacity would be constructed near Martshala, both in Samdrupjongkhar.

The Pre-Feasibility Study of Nyera-Amari Hydropower Project I and II was carried out at a cost of Nu 16 million in 2014. The financing from ADB comes from its two different funding windows, US\$ 227.94 million from Ordinary Capital Resource (OCR) and US\$ 92.06 million from Asian Development Fund (ADF). The construction of the project could commence by 2018 to be completed within five to six year. The project is estimated to cost Nu. 34.78 billion at April 2014 price level. Nyera-Amari is estimate to generate 478 MU (million units) of energy from the first stage and 1,222MU from the second, totalling 1,700 MU.

Hydropower sales earn Nu 12.5 billion in 2015⁴²

The hydropower plants in Bhutan earned around Nu 12.5 billion in 2015, excluding Nu 1.47 billion that was endowed as the royalty energy to the government for the year. This was an increase of about Nu 1.5 billion from 2014 but still inferior to 2013 earnings of Nu 13.05 billion. Electricity generation last year increased by a meagre three per cent to 7,381 (million units) MU from 7,147 MU in 2014. In 2013 the generation increased by 10.75 per cent to 7,513MU compared with 2012. About 75 percent of the total energy generated last year (5324MU) was exported, an increase of around 6.2 per cent compared with 2014. This helped the country earn around INR 10.6 billion, but again in comparison with 2013, when the country experienced improved hydrology, export last year dropped. In 2013, export alone earned Nu 11 billion. Import figures slightly dropped to 142MU last year from 187 MU in 2014. Otherwise, power import shot up from 55MU in 2012 to 108MU in 2013. But going by the National Accounts statistics, 2015, published by NSB, electricity import during winter was growing. Between 2000 and 2010, there was a gradual increase in imports with an average of 52.5MU a year. The highest import ever has taken place in 2014. However, electricity loss in transmission and distribution has been more than imports until 2012.

Bhutan climbs to 27th on corruption index⁴³

Bhutan jumped three places up the ladder to 27th place on this year's corruption perception index (CPI), once again emerging as the cleanest nation in the region and 6th in Asia. Scoring 65 points out of 100, the country is recognised as 27th cleanest nation of the 168 countries. Since 2006, when the country was included in the CPI ranking, Bhutan's score has improved over the years from the 49th position in 2009 to 30th in 2014. In the South Asia region, India is placed at 76 followed by Sri Lank at 83, Pakistan at 117, Nepal at 130 and Afghanistan at 166.

Indo-Bhutan friendship mela organised in Assam⁴⁴

The weeklong 6th Indo-Bhutan Friendship Mela (fair) began on January 27 in Subankhata, Assam, to celebrate the close bond that India and Bhutan have fostered over the years. Deputy Commissioner of Baksa and SJ dzongdag declare the fair open.

Maldives

Foreign secretary and special envoy of the PM of India visits Maldives⁴⁵

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom discussed ways to further reinforce and strengthen the existing diplomatic and political relations between India and the Maldives with Foreign Secretary and Special Envoy of the Prime Minister of India, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar on January 11, 2016. The President and the Indian Foreign Secretary spoke of supporting each other in the international arena and in times of political distress. Further discussions were held regarding cross-border terrorism, health care and economic development in the Maldives. The President was accompanied at the meeting by Minister of Foreign Affairs Dunya Maumoon, Foreign Secretary of Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Ali Naseer Mohamed and Under Secretary at the President's Office Mohamed Naseer.

Pact with Maldives in 2014 gets Indian cabinet approval⁴⁶

The Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation between Maldives and India on health sector related matters signed between the two countries in January 2014 during President Abdulla Yameen's visit to India, obtained Indian Cabinet approval on January 13. The MoU covers assistance to Maldives in developing human resources in healthcare sector, as well as greater cooperation in exchange and training of doctors and other health professionals, and medical and health research development. It also covers cooperation in management of healthcare sector and public health services, procurement of generic and essential drugs and assistance in sourcing of drug supplies, health promotion and disease prevention, traditional and complementary medicine, telemedicine and any other area of cooperation that the two countries agree upon.

India to gift Maldives helicopter, aircraft⁴⁷

Indian government has made the decision to gift Maldives another helicopter and a fixed-wing aircraft. Defense Minister Adam Shareef, who made a three-day official visit to India, posted on social media on January 20 that he met with Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar and top military officers, and that Parrikar had vowed to gift Maldivian government a helicopter and a fixed-wing aircraft during the meeting.

President Yameen sends message of sympathy to Indian Prime Minister⁴⁸

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom has sent a message of sympathy to Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, following the earthquake that occurred in northeast India.

Maldives condemns the terrorist attack on the Indian airbase⁴⁹

The Maldives has condemned attack on the Indian Air Force base in Pathankot, Punjab. In a statement issued by the Maldivian Foreign Ministry on January 6, the Maldivian Government strongly condemned the attack saying that terrorism is threat to peace and humanity. "The cowardly attack that took place in Pathankot will only strengthen our resolve to remain steadfast in our collective efforts to bring an end to this global scourge forever", the statement said.

Bangladesh gifts MNDF vehicles during Chief of army staff's visit to the Maldives⁵⁰

Bangladesh government has gifted Maldives National Defence Force with seven vehicles. The vehicles were gifted by Bangladesh Chief of Army Staff General Abu Bilal Shafiul Haq in a ceremony held at Kalhuthukkala Koshi on January 18. The gift of seven Toyota pickups was accepted on behalf of MNDF by Chief of Defence Force, Major General Ahmed Shiyam. During the speech given by Bangladesh Chief of Army during the ceremony, he noted that the friendly ties between the two countries dated back to a long time. He emphasised that military training programs and exercises between the two countries would further strengthen the ties and increase cooperation. He also said that Bangladesh was ready to provide education to Maldivian students in civil institutions in Bangladesh, as well as provide them with opportunities for higher studies in the field of military. He also expressed interest in Bangladesh to involve in Maldivian fishing industry. Major General Ahmed Shiyam said that Bangladesh government had discussed providing opportunity to join in on military exercises with them, and that it would be executed soon. Chief of Army Staff of Bangladesh Army, General Abu Belal Muhammad Shafiul Haq came to Maldives on January 15 on an official visit. He was welcomed at Ibrahim Nasir International Airport upon arrival by Vice-Chief of Defense Force, Brigadier General Ahmed Shahid. During the visit, Abu Belal met with President Abdulla Yameen and Defense Minister Adam Shareef. Bangladeshi Chief of Army Staff left Maldives on January 20 after concluding his official visit to the country.

Maldivian Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon visits Pakistan⁵¹

Maldivian Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon made an official visit to Pakistan. During the visit, she met with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, at Prime Minister's Office in Islamabad, and conveyed regards from President Abdulla Yameen, and thanked Pakistani Government for the warm welcome she received. The meeting was also attended by Maldivian High Commissioner to Pakistan Ahmed Saleem and Joint Secretary of Foreign Affairs Faruzana Zahir. Dhunya also met with Pakistani Prime Minister's Advisor for Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz and Special Assistant for Foreign Affairs Said Tariq Fathimi.

Sri Lankan foreign minister and finance minister visit Maldives⁵²

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera and Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake made an official visit to the Maldives and met President Yameen. President Yameen, Minister Samaraweera and Minister Karunanayake discussed the bilateral relations between the countries and focused on areas and issues for further cooperation including the fight against terrorism. Minister Samaraweera, during the meeting, thanked President Yameen for the invitation to visit Maldives and assured him that the Sri Lankan Government would work towards further strengthening the bilateral ties between the two countries. The meeting was held at President's Office and was attended by Maldivian Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon, Foreign Secretary Dr. Ali Naseer Mohamed and President's Office Under Secretary Mohamed Naseer.

President Yameen meets with Thai prime minister⁵³

President of Maldives Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom met with Prime Minister of Thailand General Chan-ocha. President's Office said that during the meeting, the President and the Prime Minister highlighted areas to be further addressed in order to enhance the good working relationship between the Maldives and Thailand, and discussed supporting each other within the international arena. President Yameen reiterated the Maldives' interest in easing travel to Thailand by signing a visa waiver agreement between the two countries, as a measure of further strengthening people-to-people contact, trade, and economic relations. The President was accompanied at the meeting by Under Secretary (Foreign Relations) at the President's Office Mohamed Naseer, Spokesperson at the President's Office Ibrahim Muaz Ali, and Honorary Consul of Maldives in Thailand Sanam Angubolkul.

China donates MVR 5.7 million worth of medical equipment⁵⁴

The Chinese Government has donated MVR 5.7 million worth of medical equipment used in the "Bright Journey" Eye Campaign in Hulhumalé to the Maldivian health sector. At a special ceremony held at the Hulhumalé Hospital, the equipment used in the eye campaign was handed over to the Maldivian government by the Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives, Wang Fukang. The equipment was accepted by the Minister of Health Iruthisham Adam. Health Minister Iruthisham Adam expressed gratitude on behalf of the Maldivian people to the Chinese Ambassador Wang Fukang.

Japan opens its resident Embassy in Male⁵⁵

A new Japanese resident Embassy was opened in Male' City on January 1, 2016. Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon said that opening of the Japanese Embassy in the Maldives is a new chapter in the relations between the Maldives and Japan. Minister Dunya said that a Japanese Embassy in the Maldives not only symbolises the relations between the two countries but it is also "another stamp of approval by the international community of the strong and prudent policies of President Yameen." Japan has been providing aid to the Maldives in diverse sectors via Embassy of Japan in Colombo, Sri Lanka until now. A Maldivian resident Embassy was opened in Tokyo in 2007.

Saudi Arabia's Shura Council speaker donates \$100,000 to Islamic University⁵⁶

Speaker of Saudi Arabia's Shura Council, Dr. Abdulla bin Mohamed bin Ibrahim Al-Sheikh, donated \$100,000 to the Islamic University of Maldives (IUM). This was announced on Twitter by Vice Chancellor of IUM, Dr. Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed. Dr. Shaheem said that the donation was made during a meeting at the University on January 4, between Dr. Abdulla and the Chancellor and senior officials of the IUM. Dr. Abdulla came to Maldives on January 3 on the invitation of Speaker of Parliament of Maldives, Abdulla Maseeh. As part of his visit, Dr. Abdulla also met with Minister of Foreign Affairs Dunya Maumoon and visited the ministry of Islamic affairs.

Maldives condemns nuclear test by N. Korea⁵⁷

Maldivian Government has condemned the hydrogen bomb test conducted by North Korea. Maldivian Foreign Ministry released a statement on January 15 which says, "the recent nuclear test by DPRK is a clear act of defiance and provocation to its regional neighbours. The Maldives considers DPRK's nuclear weapons ambition not only as a hindrance to regional stability but also as a serious threat to international peace and security as a whole."

Hugo Swire visits Maldives⁵⁸

The Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and MP for East Devon, Hugo Swire made a visit to the Maldives. During the visit, he met with President Abdulla Yamin Abdul Gayoom, the former President of the Maldives and the President of the current ruling party PPM, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and different political party leaders in the Maldives including the opposition MDP and Adhaalath Party. At his meeting with President Yamin, both sides expressed their commitment to further strengthening existing bilateral ties between the Maldives and the UK. Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dunya Maumoon, Foreign Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Ali Naseer Mohamed, and Undersecretary (Foreign Relations) at the President's Office, Mr. Mohamed Naseer were present at the President's meeting with Swire. Hugo Swire left the Maldives on January 18 after completing his official visit.

Sanctions may be imposed on some Maldivians: Cameron⁵⁹

British Prime Minister David Cameron said that his government may impose sanctions on some Maldivian individuals if the Maldivian Government fails to free political prisoners. Cameron made the statement in parliament on January 27 in an answer to a question posed by a lawmaker John Glen on whether the country would work on building an international consensus on targeting sanctions.

Economic Minister Saeed appointed to the Board of AIIB⁶⁰

Minister of Economic Development, Mohamed Saeed has been appointed to the Board of Directors of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Chinese led Multilateral Development Bank (MDB) conceived for the 21st century. This was confirmed by the Housing Minister Dr. Mohamed Muizzu while talking to the press after his return from his official visit to China to take part in the official inauguration of AIIB. Minister Muizzu said that Economic Minister Saeed was appointed as the Alternative Director of AIIB and the Maldives would be Executive Director of the bank until June. Regarding the official inauguration of AIIB, Housing Minister Dr. Muizzu said that while the bank is set to issue developmental loans this year, the President of the Bank has assured that they would work to arrange the funds for development projects of the Maldives.

Former President Mohamed Nasheed in the UK for his medical treatment⁶¹

Former President Mohamed Nasheed left the country to UK for his medical treatment on January 18 on a 30 days period given by the government. Government has given Nasheed 30 days during which he needs to come back to the country

and hand himself over to Maldives Correctional Service officials. Nasheed's brother, Dr. Ibrahim Nashid signed documents on behalf of Nasheed's family to act as a guarantor that he will return back to the country after medical treatment. In response to a question posed by a reporter during press conference held at Foreign Ministry Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon said that Nasheed being allowed to go to UK shortly after high level officials from other countries visited Maldives was just a 'coincidence'. Dunya Maumoon said that imprisoned Nasheed had not been granted permission to travel to UK for his surgery due to international pressure. She said that Nasheed was given permission to go abroad after he sent a written letter requesting it. Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and MP for East Devon, Hugo Swire tweeted on January 19 saying that he is pleased that the former President Mohamed Nasheed has been allowed access to medical treatment in the UK and is a positive step for rule of law, HR and democracy in the Maldives. American Ambassador to Maldives and Sri Lanka, Amb Atul Keshap also welcomed Maldivian government's decision to permit Nasheed to travel out of the country for his surgery. Nasheed made a stop in Sri Lanka on his way to the UK, Where he met with foreign diplomats including American Ambassador to Maldives and Sri Lanka, Amb Atul Keshap and discussed the state of Maldivian politics. The British High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and Maldives James Dauris met with former President Mohamed Nasheed in Colombo. The British envoy in a Twitter message commented that it was a pleasure to meet the former President "more than ten years after we first met in London."

Government creates new company Khazaanaa Maldives Limited⁶²

The Maldivian government has created a new company Khazaanaa (Treasure) Maldives Limited to establish an Islamic Financing Center and to gain funds for the state via Islamic Financing. The resolution signed by President Abdulla Yamin Abdul Gayoom to create the company says that the reserve of the company is MVR 1 billion. The company was created under the Law of Companies as an independent company.

Gross international reserves at \$566.7 million at the end of November 2015⁶³

Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) has announced in its Monthly Economic Review, December 2015, that the gross international reserves stood at \$566.7 million at the end of November 2015. The Central Bank said that this was a decline of 1 per cent in monthly terms, and an increase of 4 per cent in annual terms.

Nepal

Prime Minister Oli interacts with his Indian counterpart over phone⁶⁴

Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli telephoned his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi on January 1, 2015 and briefed him on political developments in Nepal. Besides exchanging New Year's greetings, the two prime ministers also discussed a wide range of issues, including ongoing restrictions on flow of good through Nepal-India border points. During the conversation, Modi emphasised the importance of finding a durable solution to political problems facing Nepal based on consensus or 'sahmati'. During the conversation Modi invited Oli to visit India at a convenient time. Reportedly, Oli urged Modi to take initiatives to ease the supply of commodities through the Raxaul-Birgunj border. Modi reiterated that the

restrictions were due to the protests on the Nepali side and his government had no role in halt of supplies. Modi also said that flow of goods through border points except Birgunj-Raxaul was increasing and that he has instructed his Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj to airlift necessary medicines to Nepal. This is the third conversation between Oli and Modi since Oli became the prime minister on October 11.

Dahal urges Indian envoy Rae to end border blockade soon⁶⁵

During the meeting with Indian Ambassador Ranjit Rae at his residence in Lazimpat, Kathmandu on January 3, Chairman of the UCPN (Maoist), Pushpa Kamal Dahal said that the border blockade imposed by India for the past few months would hamper the friendly relations between the two countries. He was of the opinion that the southern border points should be opened soon as problems surfaced in Tarai-Madhes would be ended within few days with the activism of the major political parties. In response, Indian Ambassador Rae said India also wanted to the end of border blockade soon, said Dahal's chief personal aide, Jokh Bahadur Mahara, quoting Ambassador Rae.

Friendship bus service between India-Nepal resumes⁶⁶

A friendship bus service between India and Nepal via Champawat in Uttarakhand, was resumed on January 3 after a gap of 27 years. The bus which runs between Kanchanpur in Nepal close to Banbasa border in Champavat district of Uttarakhand and Anand Vihar, Delhi had been regularised from January 4 after being run on a trial basis for a week, in charge of Sharda barrage international police station B M Upreti said.

NOC team leaves for IOC HQ⁶⁷

Following Indian Oil Corporation's (IOC) assurance to provide petroleum products at any quantity, Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) sent its delegation to the IOC headquarters in Delhi to place the demand. A team led by Mukunda Ghimire, director of NOC, headed to India to discuss the amount of fuel Nepal needs. The team has also been asked to complete the documentation process to reroute liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) bullets stuck at India's Raxaul, besides increasing the fuel supply quota, according to NOC Managing Director Gopal Bahadur Khadka. The bullets have been stuck at Raxaul ever since September 22, 2015. Meanwhile, the Parliamentary Committee on Industry on January 14 cleared the government's plan to rent additional LPG bullet tankers to increase consignments from India. It has also directed the government to hold necessary study if NOC plans to buy new bullets.

India extends Rs 44.16 million assistance for eye care programmes⁶⁸

India has extended a financial assistance of Rs 44.16 million to Nepal Netra Jyoti Sangh (NNJS) for organising Eye Care Programme in various districts. Kathmandu-based Indian Embassy signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to this effect with NNJS, a non-profit organisation, as a part of Nepal-India Cooperation Programme of the Government of India at Hotel Himalaya, Lalitpur on January 19. Minister of Health and Population Ram Janam Chaudhary, Indian Ambassador Ranjit Rae, NNJS Chairman Prof. Dr. Tirtha Prasad Mishra, among other

distinguished members were present at the MoU signing programme. India has provided a total grant assistance of NRs. 254.16 million to Nepal Netra Jyoti Sangh for organising eye care services in the different corners of Nepal since 2001.

Ambassador Upadhyay meets Congress President Sonia Gandhi⁶⁹

Nepali Ambassador to India Deep Kumar Upadhyay held a meeting with President of Indian National Congress, Sonia Gandhi, at the latter's residence in 10 Janpath, New Delhi on January 27. Indian Congress leader Karan Singh and Nepal's political counsellor Tirtharaj Wagle were also present during the meet.

Nepali and Indian officials discuss implementation of the PTA⁷⁰

Nepali and Indian officials on January 28 discussed the implementation of the Power Trade Agreement (PTA) signed between the two countries in 2014. The development of transmission lines for trading power, among other pertinent issues, were on the agenda of the meeting of the Joint Working Group (JWG) held in Kathmandu. The conference also explored methods to remove barriers for effective implementation of the agreement that paved the way for free power trade. Madhu Prasad Bhetwal, deputy director general of the Department of Electricity Development (DoED), led the Nepali side at the meeting while Ghanshyam Prasad, director of India's Ministry of Power, led the seven-member Indian delegation. The meeting was slated to be chaired by Sanjay Sharma, joint secretary of the Ministry of Energy, and Jyoti Arora, joint secretary of India's Ministry of Power. However, after the Indian side said that Arora would not be able to attend, the two countries decided to have their respective directors lead the talks due to the need to follow protocol.

Labour agreement likely between Nepal and Saudi Arabia⁷¹

In a meeting held in Saudi Arabia, a technical team led by secretary at the Ministry of Labour and Employment Ram Kumar Acharya and Saudi Arabian officials decided to agree on all types of labour including domestic work. Nepal has been asking Saudi Arabia to reach an agreement on all types of labours, while Saudi Arabia was adamant on reaching an agreement only on domestic labourers. Acting Nepali ambassador to Saudi Arabia Ananda Prasad Sharma said that all preparations including finalising the draft had been completed for reaching the agreement. In the meeting, some issues ranging from the salary and facilities of Nepali migrant workers in Saudi Arabia and their welfare among others were discussed, a Nepali official partaking in the meeting said. The Nepali team, including joint secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ramesh Prasad Khanal and joint secretary at the Ministry of Labour and Employment Gobinda Mani Bhurtel, have returned home after completing its task.

Finance minister of Nepal urges China to settle pending issues⁷²

Finance Minister Bishnu Poudel urged his Chinese counterpart Lou Jiwei to conclude the issue of trade, transit and investment between the two countries before Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's planned formal visit to China. The Finance Ministry said in a press release that Poudel had urged the Chinese minister to cooperate in holding a high-level meeting between the two sides before Oli's visit.

Poudel went to China to participate in the opening ceremony of China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) of which Nepal is a founding member. During the meeting with the Chinese finance minister, Poudel also asked him to increase Chinese investment in fuel supply and infrastructure development. Lou said that China was positive to Nepal's proposals and insisted that bilateral relations be developed with an eye on long-term mutual benefit.

Chinese team conducts feasibility study on goldmine in Jajarkot⁷³

A Chinese company has started the feasibility study of gold mines on the banks of Bheri River in Jajarkot district. Dharmashree Mines is conducting the study at Dhalla Khalanga and Jagatipur in the district under the leadership of Chinese national Sung Ping. The team has drilled a 150 ft hole for the study but no progress is traced so far, the Chinese national said. The team is expected to stay three more months in Jajarkot. The Chinese firm has also constructed the 2-km long road to reach the digging site with necessary equipments.

BBIN to talk rail project⁷⁴

Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) have agreed to hold talks on the possibility of "BBIN Rail Agreement" drawing on the draft SAARC Regional Rail Agreement template. The third meetings of the Joint Working Groups on Sub-Regional Cooperation between BBIN on water resources management and power/hydropower, connectivity and transit that concluded in Dhaka on January 20, agreed on settling various issues, including land ports and land customs stations, that are crucial for sub-regional trade and transit. The working group also decided to collaborate on power trade, inter-grid connectivity cooperation in future power projects and water resources management between the four countries during the discussion on water resources management and power/hydropower.

Naya Shakti forms 35-member Interim Council⁷⁵

Baburam Bhattarai announced a 35-member Interim Council which would be transformed into a new political party within a month. Former Finance Secretary Rameshore Khanal, former AIG Ganesh Rai, Artists Ashok Sharma, Karishma Manandhar and Saroj Khanal, among other personalities, have been associated with the Naya Shakti. Bhattarai has been named the coordinator of the council. The main principles of the new force are said to be participatory democracy, good governance, accountability and rule of law.

Parliament endorses first amendment to the constitution⁷⁶

Parliament on January 23, amidst the din of slogan-shouting by the agitating Madhes-based parties, endorsed the First Amendment to the Constitution of Nepal, exactly four months after its promulgation on September 20. Of the 468 lawmakers who participated in voting, 461 voted in favour of the Constitution Amendment Bill and seven lawmakers from Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party and Rastriya Janamorcha voted against. The Madhes-based parties, who since the country adopted the new charter have been protesting in the Tarai plains, did not participate in the voting. Amendment on three Articles of the constitution are: Article 42 (social justice),

Article 84 (formation of House of Representatives) and Article 286 (Electoral Constituency Delineation Commission). However, the Madhesis, whose protests have led to a blockade of the border with India, have rejected the amendments saying they did not go far enough to meet their demands. Their principal demand is the creation of two separate Madhesi provinces in the plains region, which was not included in amendment project. Participating in the walkout before the vote on the amendment, Laxman Lal Karna of the United Democratic Madhesi Front said, "It does not even touch our main demand for changing the borders of the provinces." Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has welcomed Nepal parliament's vote to amend the constitution and hoped that the positive development would help ease the border blockade.

Nepal slips further in corruption ranking⁷⁷

Nepal has further slipped on the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2015 of Transparency International, continuing its standing as one of the most corrupt states in the world. The annual survey released by the Berlin-based watchdog has placed Nepal in 130 positions with a score of 27 among 167 surveyed countries. Nepal failed to improve both country wise ranking and score. It was placed 126th rank on the index among surveyed countries with 29 marks last year.

Pakistan

Attack on Indian Air Force base, Pakistan condemns attack⁷⁸

At least four gunmen alleged to be from Jaish-i-Mohammed group dressed in army uniforms infiltrated the Pathankot air base in northern Punjab on January 2. Later an alliance of Kashmiri militant groups the United Jihad Council (UJC) claimed the deadly attack. The UJC said in a statement released that the attack was a message to India that Kashmiri fighters could strike at any sensitive installation across India. Special commandos secured the Pathankot Air Force base 14 hours after it was infiltrated by the gunmen. Pakistan condemned the attack in Pathankot, and said it remains committed to partner with India as well as other countries in the region to completely eradicate the menace of terrorism afflicting the region. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to take "firm and immediate action" against those behind an attack on an Indian Air Force base that left seven soldiers dead. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif assured his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi on January 5 that Islamabad would not hesitate to take "prompt and decisive action" if the involvement of Pakistan-based elements in the attack on an Indian airbase was proved beyond doubt. The United States has urged India and Pakistan to stay the course and not allow extremists to prevent them from engaging to resolve bilateral issues. At a US State Department news briefing, spokesperson John Kirby also asked Pakistan to act against perpetrators of the deadly attack on an Indian Air Force base. Pakistan and India have mutually agreed to defer their foreign secretaries' meeting planned for January 15 as the focus remained on Pakistan's action against alleged perpetrators of the Pathankot attack. No new dates have been given, except for an assertion by both sides that the meeting would be held "in very near future". The decision on postponing the meeting was taken during a telephonic conversation between Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry and his Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar.

Saudi foreign minister visits Pakistan⁷⁹

Pakistan reaffirmed on January 7 its support to Saudi Arabia, which is embroiled in a tense standoff with Iran, and the counter-terrorism coalition that it (Riyadh) was setting up. The reiteration of support for the Saudi government was made during a shortened visit by Saudi Foreign Minister Dr. Adel Al-Jubeir to Islamabad for discussions on his country's diplomatic row with Iran and the multinational coalition against terrorism it (Saudi Arabia) had announced. Additionally, a media statement said the two sides discussed regional and global issues of common concern and agreed on promoting multi-faceted cooperation. The Saudi foreign minister started his whirlwind tour of Islamabad with a meeting with Army Chief General Raheel Sharif at GHQ and then visited Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at his residence before concluding the trip with a meeting with Adviser on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz. Jubeir, who led a 17-member delegation, stayed in Islamabad for a little over six hours. His trip was officially described as a 'working visit'. As the Saudi foreign minister landed in Islamabad, protesters from various religious parties held a protest demonstration in the federal capital's D-Chowk against Pakistan's decision to join the Saudi-led coalition and execution of Sheikh Nimr.

Role in anti-terror coalition discussed with Saudi Arabia⁸⁰

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Army Chief General Raheel Sharif made a two-day visit to Saudi Arabia and Iran. In Riyadh, the prime minister and army chief held talks with Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. The army chief separately also met Saudi Defence Minister Mohammad bin Salman. In Iran, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif met with President Hassan Rouhani, First Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri and Defence Minister Hossein Dehghan. Army Chief Gen Raheel Sharif, who is accompanying the prime minister, held separate meetings with Secretary of National Security Council Ali Shamkhani and Defence Minister Dehghan. The prime minister and the army chief were in Tehran after visiting Riyadh for what the government described as a move for defusing tensions between the two Muslim countries that were sparked by execution of Saudi dissident Sheikh Nimr and the subsequent attack on Saudi mission in Iran by protesters.

Pakistan not joining any anti-Iran coalition, Asif tells NA⁸¹

Defence Minister Khawaja Asif assured the National Assembly that Pakistan under no circumstances would join a military alliance against Iran, contrary to speculations doing the round because of the country's support for a Saudi-led coalition of 34 Muslim nations aimed at curtailing the spread of extremism and terrorism in the region. Asif, who looks after the key portfolios of water and power as well as defence, said in a policy statement before the house: "After Iran, Pakistan has the second largest Shia population in the world, so how can we even think of joining an anti-Shia military alliance." Above all, the defence minister claimed, Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah – the founder of the nation – was also an adherent of a Shia sect, just like many others who had played a key role in the development of this country.

Balochistan joins hands with Iranian province to curb terrorism⁸²

Balochistan Chief Minister Nawab Sanaullah Khan Zehri and Deputy Governor of Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province Ali Asghar Mir Shikari have agreed to work

together to curb terrorism, with the former also expressing the hope that the volume of Pak-Iran trade would increase to \$10 billion per year. The Iranian delegation, headed by Shikari, called on Zehri at the Chief Minister's Secretariat in Quetta on January 27. Leaders of both countries agreed to join hands against terrorists in border areas while their respective border forces would exchange information regarding terrorist activities. During the Pak-Iran Joint Border Commission meeting the two sides inked memorandums of understanding (MoUs) on stopping border crossing by illegal immigrants, strengthening border security, jointly fighting against terrorism, curbing drug trafficking and discouraging illegal trade between them. It was decided that at least five markets would be set up in the border areas of Balochistan — in Gabd (Gwadar), Taftan, Panjgur, Washuk and Mand — to boost bilateral trade. The meeting approved a proposal about the laying of a railway track between Gwadar and the Iranian port city of Chabahar. "Survey on the project will start soon."

Deep sea phase of Pak-China naval exercise concludes⁸³

The deep sea phase of the Pakistan Navy and China's People's Liberation Army — Navy (PLA-Navy) third bilateral exercise concluded at the Arabian Sea on January 12. The PLA Navy Task Group comprising two destroyers and one fleet tanker, headed by Rear Admiral Yu Manjiang, visited Karachi to participate in the exercise. The phase of the exercise covered a wide spectrum of maritime and naval operations by ships, helicopters, maritime patrol aircraft, fighters and special forces. Joint boarding operations by special forces, air defence exercises, communication drills and joint manoeuvres by ships were the hallmark of the events. A de-brief/hot wash-up of the exercise was also held at sea upon culmination of the exercise. Earlier, the maiden exercise of the series was held in September 2014 at Karachi. It laid a solid foundation for the second exercise in Shanghai, China from December 28, 2015 to January 3, 2016.

Deal signed with China for 800 hopper wagons⁸⁴

The railways ministry signed a contract with China's Jinan Railway Vehicles Equipment Company on January 14, for the supply of 800 hopper wagons, a railroad freight car, which will be used to transport coal from Port Bin Qasim to power plants, including the Qadirabad power plant near Sahiwal. The vehicles equipment company is a subsidiary of the China CNR Corporation. Pakistan Railways Director Procurement Ziauddin Qureshi and the chief executive of China CNR signed the agreement on behalf of their respective sides. Under the terms of agreement, Jinan will supply 200 complete built units (CBU) wagons and 580 complete knock-down (CKD) wagons to be manufactured at the Mughalpura railway workshop. It was decided that five freight trains will operate daily from Port Bin Qasim to Qadirabad to transport 12,000 tons of coal for power projects. According to the ministry, the total cost of 800 wagons was estimated to be Rs 3.92 billion. They said that the wagons will be supplied within six to 10 months.

Prime Minister Sharif urges US to give preferential access to Pakistani goods⁸⁵

A 14-member delegation headed by Chairman of the US-Pakistan Business Council, Miles Young, and Vice Chairman Mehmood Khan met Prime Minister Nawaz

Sharif on January 14, 2016. US Ambassador to Pakistan David Hale was also present at the meeting. Addressing the delegation of the US-Pakistan Business Council at the PM House, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project would spur regional economic integration and bring about prosperity in the region. He asked the council to play its role in urging US lawmakers to give importance to providing preferential market access to Pakistani goods. He expressed the confidence that the council would continue to share with the larger US business community positive experiences of doing business with and investing in Pakistan.

Pakistan to export one million tonnes rice to Indonesia⁸⁶

Pakistan has signed an agreement with Indonesia to export one million tonnes of rice estimated at around \$400 million over four years, the Ministry of Commerce said in statement on January 7. The agreement for export of rice will be implemented by the Trading Corporation of Pakistan (TCP) and Indonesia's Bulog (State Logistic Agency). Pakistan is the first country out of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to have rice export agreement with Indonesia. Pak-Indonesia trade rose 215 per cent to \$2.2 billion in 2014 from \$ 700 million in 2010 after the conclusion of Preferential Trade Agreement.

Sartaj Aziz meets Maldives foreign minister⁸⁷

Pakistan and Maldives expressed satisfaction on January 28 over bilateral relations between the two countries and agreed to maintain the momentum. Maldives Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon and Adviser to Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz discussed regional and international issues during a meeting held at the foreign ministry. He observed that the tourism industry of Maldives had been growing and Pakistan would like to develop cooperation in this sector. He said that development of shipping lines between the two countries held a lot of importance and efforts should be made towards this. The adviser emphasised the need to follow up on the MoUs and agreements signed in the fields of health, education and narcotics during a visit by the Maldives' president to Pakistan in May 2015. The Maldives' foreign minister called for strengthening bilateral relations by promoting people-to-people contacts. She said that exchange of students, artists and other professionals would foster goodwill between peoples of the two countries. She appreciated the support Pakistan had been extending to her country at different regional and international fora.

MoU for boosting Pak-Canada trade signed⁸⁸

A Memoranda of Understanding for promotion of bilateral trade and investment was signed by the Punjab Board of Investment and Trade (PBIT) and Canada Pakistan Business Council on January 5, 2016. The 10-member Canadian delegation was led by Patrick Brown and Salma Ataullah Jan while the PBIT team was led by its chairman Abdul Basit and CEO Amena Cheema. A comprehensive presentation on potential projects in education, livestock and dairy, food, energy, infrastructure and mines and minerals sectors was shared. In 2013, bilateral trade between Pakistan and Canada was worth \$700 million.

Sharif invites Swiss investors to Pakistan⁸⁹

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has invited Swiss and international investors to Pakistan's energy, telecom, infrastructure, urban development, agro-industry and textiles sectors, saying that they offer exciting opportunities for investment, at a breakfast meeting in Davos. The meeting was attended by Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, Commerce Minister Engineer Khurram Dastgir, Special Assistant to Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Tariq Fatemi and Miftah Ismail besides a hundred participants of the World Economic Forum.

Pakistani consulate attacked in Jalalabad⁹⁰

Seven Afghan troops were killed on January 13 when militants launched an hours-long gun and bomb siege targeting the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, just days after four-country talks in Islamabad aimed at reviving peace negotiations with Taliban. The militant Islamic State (IS) group claimed responsibility for the attack on the consulate, stoking fears over the spread of the ultra-radical movement in Afghanistan.

Militants storm university, massacre 20⁹¹

Militants stormed the Bacha Khan University campus on January 20, killing 20 people, including students, a faculty member and security guards, before being eliminated in a military-led operation.

Nawaz Sharif discusses peace efforts with Ghani and Biden⁹²

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif held a trilateral meeting with US Vice President Joe Biden and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in Davos on January 21 and discussed with them efforts for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. The meeting, on the sidelines of the 46th World Economic Forum, reviewed the progress made so far and pondered on the way forward. US Secretary of State John Kerry, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar and Special Assistant to Prime Minister Tariq Fatemi attended the meeting.

Afghan soil used for BKU attack, envoy told⁹³

The Afghan Charge d'Affaires, Syed Abdul Nasir Yousafi, was summoned to the Foreign Office (FO) over allegations that terrorists planned and directed the Bacha Khan University (BKU) attack from Afghanistan. The Afghan diplomat was called to the Foreign Office on January 25 to convey Pakistan's concern regarding the use of Afghan soil by certain terrorist elements in the terrorist attack on Bacha Khan University in Charsadda on Jan 20. Yousafi was summoned by the FO six days after the attack on the university in which 21 persons, including students, staff and teachers, were killed. Army Chief General Raheel Sharif had phoned Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah a day after the tragic incident to inform them that evidence pointed towards the Afghanistan connection. The evidence was soon afterwards delivered to Afghan authorities through military channels. The FO statement also acknowledged that "the relevant details have already been shared with the Afghan side".

Sri Lanka

Afghan army delegation meets corps commander⁹⁴

An eight-member delegation of Afghan National Army headed by Corps Commander Lt. General Mohammad Sharif Yaftali called on Commander of 11th Corps Lt General Hidayatur Rehman on January 30, according to the Inter Services Public Relations. The two sides discussed matters of mutual interest and security arrangements at the Pak-Afghan border. They agreed on better coordination and enhancing security measures on both sides. The Afghan delegation's visit is the follow-up of Army Chief General Raheel Sharif's trip to Afghanistan during which it was decided that corps commanders from both sides would hold meetings for better border management, the statement said.

Pakistan only SAARC country to improve CPI score: TI⁹⁵

The Transparency International (TI) maintained on January 26 that Pakistan was the only country among the five SAARC countries that improved its Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) score. TI Pakistan Chairman Sohail Muzaffar said in a statement that the CPI score for Pakistan had again increased by one point to 30, and the country's rank had improved by three.

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visits Sri Lanka⁹⁶

Pakistan's Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif made a three-day official visit to Sri Lanka on January 4, 2016 at the invitation of Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena. Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe received Prime Minister Sharif, accompanied by his wife, on his arrival at the Bandaranaike International Airport. The official welcome ceremony presided by President Maithripala Sirisena was held at the Presidential Secretariat in Colombo on January 5, 2016. The two countries signed a number of agreements and MoUs in the fields of trade promotion, culture, health, gem and jewellery, science and technology and combating money laundering and terror financing.

Pakistani commerce minister visits Sri Lanka⁹⁷

Pakistan's Federal Minister for Commerce, Engr. Khurram Dastgir Khan went to Sri Lanka on January 14 on a two-day visit along with senior officials to formally inaugurate the Pakistan Single Country Exhibition 2016 in Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH) on January 15, 2016. The Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP) organised the Exhibition in collaboration with the High Commission of Pakistan in Sri Lanka.

Indian foreign secretary visits Sri Lanka⁹⁸

Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar made a visit to Sri Lanka from January 12-13, 2016. The main purpose of his visit was to pave the way for the India-Sri Lanka Joint Commission meeting in Colombo in February 2016. Dr. Jaishankar called on Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena on January 13 at the Presidential Secretariat in Colombo. Commending the Sri Lankan President for his statesman-like approach towards national reconciliation, S. Jaishankar conveyed congratulations from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the President's

one year in Office. Dr. Jaishankar also met with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, and former President of Sri Lanka Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mangala Samaraweera, Minister of Development Strategies and International Trade Malik Samarawickrema, Leader of Opposition R. Sampanthan, and his counterpart Foreign Secretary Chitrangane Wagiswara.

Norwegian foreign minister visits Sri Lanka⁹⁹

Norwegian Foreign Minister, Børge Brende made a visit to Sri Lanka on January 7, 2016. Brende's visit was the first by a Norwegian foreign minister to Sri Lanka since 2005. Welcoming his Norwegian counterpart, Sri Lanka's Foreign Affairs Minister Mangala Samaraweera said he had "very productive" meeting with the visiting minister. During the meeting, Minister Brende and his Sri Lankan counterpart discussed expanding Norwegian development assistance, especially technical assistance for the fisheries sector and solar power generation. In addition, they explored the possibility of expanding Norwegian investment in Sri Lanka, both through portfolio and foreign direct investment.

Sri Lankan PM presents resolution to make parliament a constitutional assembly¹⁰⁰

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe presented a Resolution for the appointment of the Constitutional Assembly for the purpose of formulating a new Constitution for Sri Lanka in Parliament on January 9, 2016. The Resolution proposes establishing a Committee of Parliament referred to as the 'Constitutional Assembly' which shall consist of all Members of Parliament, for the purpose of deliberating, and seeking the views and advice of the People, on a new Constitution for Sri Lanka, and preparing a draft of a Constitution Bill for the consideration of Parliament in the exercise of its powers under Article 75 of the Constitution.

Chinese delegation led by Yang Weiqun visits Sri Lanka¹⁰¹

The Chinese delegation led by Yang Weiqun, director of the department of Asian affairs at the Chinese Commerce Ministry, made an official visit to Sri Lanka. The visiting Chinese delegation met the Deputy Minister of National Policy and Economic Affairs Niroshan Perera on January 6, 2016 and discussed the Colombo port city project and other Chinese funded projects in Sri Lanka.

UN Chief congratulates President Sirisena on the first anniversary of Sri Lanka's political transition¹⁰²

The United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon congratulated Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena, and the government and the people of Sri Lanka on the first year of the country's political transition. In a statement issued in New York on January 7, the UN Chief said he is encouraged by the Government's commitment to a broad reform agenda that aims to realise durable peace, stability and prosperity for the Sri Lankan people. He commended Sri Lanka's leadership in working to transform the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals into reality on the ground.

Sri Lanka condemns the attack on Indian air base in Pathankot¹⁰³

Sri Lanka strongly condemned the terrorist attack on the Indian Air Force base in Pathankot near the Pakistan border on January 2. Issuing a statement the Foreign Affairs Ministry said the government and people of Sri Lanka extend condolences to the victims and their families.

Sri Lanka security forces on alert on ISIS threat – Ministry of Defence¹⁰⁴

Defence Secretary Karunasena Hettiarachchi recently said that Sri Lanka security officials received information that 36 Sri Lankan citizens had entered Syria secretly and some of them had joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defence assured that the security forces and all intelligence agencies were on full alert on the possibility of any groups having links with the ISIS making their appearance in the country.

Sri Lanka endorses declaration to end sexual violence in conflict¹⁰⁵

The Sri Lankan Government endorsed the declaration of commitment to end sexual violence in conflict on January 12, 2016. The Foreign Ministry said that the Government of Sri Lanka, in manifestation of its firm commitment to uphold, promote and protect the human rights of all, and denounce sexual violence, had decided to endorse the declaration of commitment to end sexual violence in conflict.

Sri Lanka- Japan Policy Dialogue¹⁰⁶

The national reconciliation and peace-building process in Sri Lanka was the focus of the discussions held in the first round of Sri Lanka- Japan Policy Dialogue at senior official level of the two foreign ministries in Colombo on January 12, 2016. The convening of the Policy Dialogue was proposed in the Joint Declaration on a "Comprehensive Partnership" between Sri Lanka and Japan, issued during the visit of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to Japan in October 2015. The Foreign Ministry issuing a statement said that the Dialogue focused on promotion of investment and trade, collaboration in the national development plan and cooperation in the national reconciliation and peace-building process in Sri Lanka. Both sides also had discussions on regional issues as well as global challenges affecting the two countries. Under the framework of the Policy Dialogue it was decided to hold three specialised dialogues: a dialogue on maritime security, safety and oceanic issues, to be chaired by the Ministry of Defence; an economic cooperation policy dialogue and consultation on national development cooperation, to be chaired by the Ministry of National Policies and Economic Affairs and an economic policy dialogue, to be chaired by the Ministry of Development Strategies and International Trade in the months of January, February and May of this year, respectively. The next round of the Policy Dialogue at the Senior Official Level of the two Foreign Ministries will be held in Tokyo, in early 2017. The Policy Dialogue was co-chaired by O.L. Ameer Ajwad, Director General of the East Asia and Pacific Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka and Kazuya Nashida, Director-General of the Southeast and Southwest Asian Affairs Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

British minister of state for Asia visits Sri Lanka¹⁰⁷

British Minister of State for Asia at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Hugo Swire, who arrived in Sri Lanka on January 14, visited the North with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to participate in the National Thai Pongal day celebrations in Jaffna. While in Jaffna, the minister held talks with the Chief Minister of Northern Province C.V. Wigneswaran and discussed land issues and long-term political solution of the ethnic issue. After meeting with the civil society leaders and human rights defenders in Jaffna and discussing the reconciliation process, Swire commented that he is positive about the government's efforts but faster progress is needed. Swire, accompanied by the British High Commissioner in Colombo James Dairies, also met with the families resettled after demining and observed the Thai Pongal rituals. The Minister visited the Kelaniya Temple and held discussion on religious affairs with the Chief Prelate of the temple. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and British Minister of State Hugo Swire had talks on January 14 on issues faced by the Tamils. According to the TNA, Swire and the TNA leaders discussed issues of accountability, constitutional reform and the day to day issues of the Tamil people. The TNA was represented by TNA Parliamentarian and spokesman M.A. Sumanthiran. British Minister of State for Asia at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Hugo Swire, addressing a press conference in Colombo before his departure, said the UK government will neither pressurise nor influence the Sri Lankan government on the formulation of a new Constitution but welcome the government's initiative in changes. Speaking at the Council for Business with Britain, Hugo Swire said that since the election of President Maithripala Sirisena last January, there has been a distinct and welcome change of atmosphere in the bilateral relationship between Sri Lanka and UK. He also pointed out the importance of establishing a non-residential Defence Attaché to support Sri Lankan military reform.

Sri Lankan prime minister attends the world economic forum¹⁰⁸

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe left for Switzerland on January 19, 2016 to attend the World Economic Forum held from 20 - 23 January 2016 in Davos-Klosters. This was the first time that a Sri Lankan political leader was invited to attend the Davos meeting. The Prime Minister met with world leaders as well as heads of multinational corporations on the sidelines of Davos meeting. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe met Swedish Premier Stefan Löfven, President of the Swiss Confederation Johann Schneider-Ammann, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutođlu, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands Mark Rutte, President of Asian Development Bank (ADB) Takehiko Nakao, and heads of Microsoft and Virgin Group.

Sri Lankan finance minister attends AIIB opening in Beijing¹⁰⁹

Minister of Finance, Ravi Karunanayake attended the opening ceremony of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) on January 17 in Beijing. Sri Lanka is a founding member of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

India invites Sri Lankan businessmen to 'Make in India'¹¹⁰

High Commission of India in Sri Lanka organised a road-show in Colombo on January 29, 2015 to invite Sri Lankan businessmen to participate in the 'Make in India Week', to be held in Mumbai from February 13-18, 2016. Minister of State for Home (Rural), Public Health, Agriculture and Horticulture, Marketing and Tourism of Maharashtra, Ram Shinde and the High Commissioner of India, Mr. Y. K. Sinha, graced the occasion. More than 150 high level representatives from the Sri Lankan business community representing various industries including garments, shipping, auto, manufacturing, health, construction and financial services participated in the road-show. The High Commission's social media portal on 'India-Sri Lanka Business Forum' was also launched on the occasion.

Sri Lanka, Viet Nam discuss boosting bilateral trade and investments¹¹¹

Sri Lanka's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Harsha de Silva during his recent high level visit to Viet Nam held discussions with high ranking officials on attracting investments from Vietnamese businesses to the island nation. During the visit, the Deputy Minister Dr. Harsha de Silva called on his counterpart, Le Hoai Trung, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and Do Thang Hai, Vice Minister of Industry and Trade. Deputy Director General of Foreign Investment Agency, counterpart of the Sri Lanka Board of Investment, Dang Xuan Quang, called on the deputy minister, during his stay there. The Deputy Minister also participated in an event organised by the Embassy of Sri Lanka in Hanoi, to launch the Sri Lanka Business Council in Viet Nam where he addressed top investors, business leaders and professionals. The Deputy Minister also attended the opening ceremony of the Linea Aqua Viet Nam and interacted with the Sri Lankan community in Viet Nam.

Sri Lanka inflation declines to 2.8 per cent in December 2015¹¹²

Sri Lanka's inflation, as measured by the change in the Colombo Consumers' Price Index, declined to 2.8 per cent in December 2015 from previous month's 3.1 per cent on a year-on-year basis, the Department of Census and Statistics reported on January 1, 2016.

Sri Lanka forex reserves stable at US\$ 7.29 billion at the end 2015¹¹³

Sri Lanka's gross official reserves stood at US \$7.292 billion as at end December 2015, marginally up from US \$ 7.281 billion reported in the previous month, according to the data released from the Central Bank. The December 2015 foreign reserves was down from US\$ 8.21 billion at the end of 2014 mainly due to debt repayments and higher imports. The December 2015 reserves included US\$ 6.46 billion in foreign reserves and US\$ 760 million in gold. Foreign reserves improved after Sri Lanka raised US\$ 1.5 billion in a 10-year sovereign bond issue in late October. Sri Lanka's gross official reserves stood at US\$ 6.5 billion as at end October. The Central Bank tried to defend the rupee by selling dollars heavily before floating it on September 3. The rupee has fallen 8.8 per cent so far this year and 6.3 per cent since it was floated.

Korea Exim bank opens office in Colombo¹¹⁴

The Export-Import Bank of Korea (Korea Eximbank) opened its Colombo Office on January 19, 2016 and began its operation. The office will help Korean companies export and import and attract foreign investment for their business in Sri Lanka, and seek and support social and economic infrastructure development projects through the Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF).

ADB to provide US\$ 1 billion in assistance to Sri Lanka for next year¹¹⁵

The Asian Development Bank has decided to increase financial assistance to Sri Lanka for development activities. Accordingly, ADB has agreed to provide one billion US dollars to Sri Lanka for the year 2017. The agreement was arrived at a meeting held between Minister of Finance Ravi Karunanayake and Executive Director of ADB Won-Mok Choi at the Parliamentary complex on January 26, 2016.

Meeting of the Working Group on Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights under the European Union-Sri Lanka Joint Commission held in Colombo¹¹⁶

The EU, in a joint statement issued following the meeting of the Working Group on Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights under the European Union-Sri Lanka Joint Commission, on January 21, 2016 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Colombo, said the meeting provided a welcome opportunity to engage in an open and constructive dialogue, reflecting on concerns, best practices, trends and developments in the areas of human rights, the rule of law and governance. The meeting of the Working Group with the participation of senior officials from Sri Lanka and the European Union follows the 19th Session of the European Union-Sri Lanka Joint Commission held in April 2015 in Colombo. The delegation of the European Union was led by Paola Pampaloni, Head of Division, Asia and the Pacific Department of the European External Action Service. The Sri Lanka delegation was led by A.L.A. Azeez, Director-General for European Union, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka condemns terrorist attack on Pakistan university¹¹⁷

Sri Lanka strongly condemned terrorist attack at the Bacha Khan University in north-west Pakistan and reiterated its support to combat terrorism.

US State Department official Macon Phillips visits Sri Lanka¹¹⁸

The United States' State Department Bureau of International Information Programs Coordinator Macon Phillips arrived in Sri Lanka on January 25 on a one-day official visit. The visit was intended at strengthening bilateral ties between the two countries.

US Marine officials visit the Sri Lanka Navy Headquarters¹¹⁹

US Marine officials visited the Sri Lanka Navy Headquarters on January 20, to participate in the initial planning conference on navy patrolmen training for the year 2016. During the visit they met the Commander of the Navy, Vice Admiral

Ravindra Wijegunaratne and discussed matters related to the training of patrolmen branch personnel.

Sri Lanka Navy pledges support to counter piracy operations¹²⁰

Commander of Sri Lanka Navy Vice Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne pledged the Navy's support to the newly appointed Commander of the Combined Task Force 151 (CTF 151), Commodore Zahid Ilyas of the Pakistan Navy, during his tenure as the commander of the multinational naval task force responsible for counter piracy operations off the coast of Somalia and the Horn of African region. The new Commander of the Combined Task Force 151 received Sri Lanka's Navy's support when he called on the Navy Commander Vice Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne at the Naval Headquarters on January 28, 2016. Commodore Ilyas was in Sri Lanka as part of key leadership engagement to enhance cooperation through direct interaction with senior naval leadership and defence officials of regional countries. He was accompanied by the Defence Advisor of the Pakistan High Commission in Sri Lanka, Colonel Muhammad Rajil Irshad Khan.

Three Chinese war ships visit Colombo port¹²¹

Three People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) ships, "Liuzhohu", "Sanya" and "Qinghaihu", arrived at the Port of Colombo on a goodwill visit on January 17, 2016 and departed on January 21, 2016. Secretary of Defense Karunasena Hettiarachchi attended a dinner reception organised on the occasion of the Chinese PLA Navy Task Force Port-Visit to Sri Lanka onboard the Liu Zhou (FFG 573) Ship in Colombo Harbor on January 18. The event was hosted by the Commander of the 21st Escort Task Group of PLA Navy Rear Admiral Yu Manjiang. Chinese Ambassador to Sri Lanka Yi Xianliang was also present at the event.

Two Indian naval ships arrive in Sri Lanka for training interaction¹²²

Indian Navy Sail Training Ships, "Tharangini" and "Sudarshini" arrived at the port of Colombo on January 17, 2016 on a training visit.

INS Vikramaditya visits Sri Lanka¹²³

Indian Naval ships Vikramaditya and Mysore were on an official visit to Colombo from January 21 -23, 2016. Maithripala Sirisena, visited INS Vikramaditya. According to the PIB press release, this visit was very significant since it marks many firsts. It was not only the first visit of the president of Sri Lanka to a foreign warship after assuming office in January 2015, but also the first head of state visit to the Indian Navy's biggest warship and aircraft carrier, INS Vikramaditya. The fact that this visit of the ship to Colombo was the first ever foreign port being visited by the ship after being inducted into the Indian Navy makes the visit of the president onboard even more remarkable, says the PIB press release.

Indian, Sri Lankan navies hold joint medical clinic in the South¹²⁴

A medical camp jointly organised by the Sri Lanka Navy and the Indian Navy on January 23 at Neluwa in Southern Sri Lanka drew about 1,000 civilians, according to a statement released by the Ministry of Defence of Sri Lanka.

Fifth India-Sri Lanka Army to Army Staff Talks in New Delhi¹²⁵

India-Sri Lanka Army to Army Staff Talks (AAST), which was organised for the fifth consecutive time, began in New Delhi on January 20, and continued till January 22, 2016. The Sri Lankan military delegation to the AAST is headed by Major General N.U.M.M.W. Senanayake, Military Secretary at Army Headquarters. Commander, Security Force Headquarters-East Major General N.J. Walgama, Commandant, Sri Lanka Military Academy Brigadier R.W.W.A.D.B. Rajaguru, Director Training Brigadier K.P.A. Jayasekara, Commandant, Officer Career Development Centre Brigadier Ralph Nugera, Additional Military Army Headquarters Secretary Brigadier S.S. Waduge, and Colonel Military Secretary, Army Headquarters Colonel S.A. Kulathunga, are the members of the Sri Lankan delegation. The Indian military delegation comprised of Director General Military Training Lieutenant General A.L. Chavan, and Military Secretary Lieutenant General Amarjeet Singh.

British war ship visits Colombo¹²⁶

The British War Ship, HMS Defender paid a routine visit to Colombo to take on stores and fuel before continuing with her duties in the Indian Ocean. This was the first time in four years that a Royal Navy warship had visited Sri Lanka.

Royal Thai Naval Ship visits Sri Lanka port on a goodwill visit¹²⁷

Sri Lanka Navy, in accordance with naval traditions, ceremonially welcomed the Royal Thai naval ship HTMS Pattani at the Port of Colombo on January 29. The ship was on a goodwill visit and left Sri Lanka on February 3, 2016.

Sri Lanka Navy arrests 9 Indian fishermen, repatriates 4¹²⁸

Sri Lanka Navy has arrested nine Indian fishermen along with their two boats for poaching in the country's waters just a day after assisting the Sri Lanka Coast Guard to repatriate four fishermen.

Sri Lankan leaders are falling short of promises to reduce corruption - Transparency International¹²⁹

Sri Lanka improved two notches in the annual Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) of the Transparency International (TI), and ranked at the 83rd place among 168 countries with a score of 37 points in 2016. In 2015 with a score of 38 points the island nation in South Asia ranked at the 85th place among 175 countries. While Sri Lanka slightly improved in ranking on the 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index despite a marginally lower score, the Transparency International (TI), says in its annual CPI that Sri Lankan leaders are falling short of their bold promises to reduce corruption.

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