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South Asia

Weekly Report 104: from 23rd jan to 29th jan 2010

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Detailed news:

A Year of Revival of Democracy in Bangladesh

The Shaikh Hasina government in Bangladesh recently completed a year in office. This had prompted many people both in Bangladesh as well as outside the country to make an assessment of the performance of her government. There is greater interest this time because Hasina government had come to office following the prolonged spell of a caretaker government. Hasina has not disappointed the Bangladeshi people during this period, but a year is too short a period to bring about any drastic change in the country.

The most prominent achievement of the Shaikh Hasina government has been in fighting terrorism. When Shaikh Hasina came to power Islamist forces were staring Bangladesh in the face. The country was also used by Indian insurgent groups for launching terror operations. Immediately after taking over Hasina made clear that she will not allow terror to have a free run in the country and delivered on this promise. Domestically, action was taken against Islamist forces. The Awami League government also acted against Indian insurgent groups and handed over all top leaders of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). This was a clear message to other terror outfits to close shop and look for other alternatives. These actions of the government have put a check on Bangladesh's slide into terrorism. During the rule of four-party alliance Bangladesh had become a conduit of arms smuggling and staging ground for terrorists. The Hasina government has also taken steps to check arms smuggling and bring to book people involved in earlier cases of arms trafficking. The government was successful on the foreign policy front too. Shaikh Hasina visited several countries including Bhutan. She addressed the UN General Assembly last September. A new beginning was made in the relationship with India due to visits of foreign minister, Dipu Moni and the subsequent visit of Shaikh Hasina herself. While a close relationship with China has continued the country also improved ties with the US and Europe. Bangladesh successfully highlighted the problem of climate change at international fora. It was represented at Copenhagen climate change conference by a hundred strong delegations. Shaikh Hasina herself visited Copenhagen during the conference and addressed it. Bangladesh managed to present its case successfully and stands to benefit from help offered by the international community.

The Awami League government has strengthened its pro-poor image by ensuring good performance in agriculture sector by giving farmers regular power supply. This was noteworthy in a country which has an acute shortage of power. This will help the party keep its rural base intact. However, the government faces a major challenge to keep food prices low while ensuring a reasonable profit for farmers. The global financial meltdown was handled effectively. Bangladesh maintained its average growth rate of five to six percent. The Bangladesh economy registered a 5.9 per cent GDP growth in FY2008-09. It was among the few countries which kept growing despite the slowdown. The financial sector in Bangladesh showed its strength and made reasonable profits. Bangladeshis working abroad sent home a record 3.61 billion dollars in remittances in the first four months of the current fiscal, registering a 21.24 percent growth over the same period in the last fiscal period. This rise in remittances showed confidence of expatriates in the domestic banking system. Though some may argue that the country did not manage to attract enough FDI and imports of capital goods remained low, it would be useful to note that progress in these areas depends on prolonged political stability and no government can do that in a short span of time. There are also several challenges before the

government. The country faces a major shortage of power. Power is needed for domestic consumption and also for industrial production. The present supply of power is insufficient for existing industries. In such a situation it is difficult to encourage people to establish new industries. The country would also be looking for massive infrastructural development. For this the India's offer of a one billion dollar credit line could be useful. The Bangladesh government is also planning to sign a similar agreement with China. Domestic politics however did not improve. The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) continued with its boycott of the parliament. The opening session of the ninth parliament had generated some hope of a productive session. Now it is quite clear that there is no change in the political culture of the country and the lessons learnt during the prolonged caretaker government have been conveniently forgotten. The Awami League has been different in one sense in that it constituted several standing committees of parliament and gave chairmanship to opposition parties, but that has not been sufficient to satisfy the opposition. The BNP led opposition is boycotting parliament on ten issues, none of which benefit the people. The last one year of democracy in Bangladesh has once again made clear to the world that both Shaikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia remain supreme in their respective parties. To the credit of Shaikh Hasina she managed the foreign policy of Bangladesh as well as macro economic situation of the country well. However, we should not forget that the last one year has been generally free from natural catastrophes for Bangladesh. Though a mutiny within the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) occurred, it was successfully overcome. Shaikh Hasina government must be appreciated for acting decisively against terrorism and making a new beginning in the area of counter-terrorism in South Asia

Bangladesh executes five Mujib killers

Bangladesh has begun executing the ex-army officers convicted of killing the country's independence leader in 1975. Five men killed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the president's wife, three sons, two daughters-in-law and approximately 20 others as part of a military coup. Only hours earlier the Bangladeshi law minister had announced that they would be executed by Sunday but could be "hanged at any moment". The five did not deny their roles in the deaths.

Bangladesh resumes shrimp exports to Europe

Bangladesh lifts self-imposed shrimp export ban Bans use of nitrofurans completely in farms Earnings fall despite rise in export volumes in 2008-09. DHAKA, Jan 27 (Reuters) - Bangladesh has resumed export of frozen shrimps to the European Union following a self-imposed ban of eight months, exporters said on Wednesday. The Bangladesh Frozen Foods Exporters Association (BFFEA) imposed the ban in May last year to remove the antibiotic nitrofurans, detected by European importers. "Fresh consignments of nitrofurans-free shrimps have already started reaching the EU market," Abul Bashar, a senior BFFEA official told Reuters.

The ban was lifted after the BFFEA confirmed that shrimps produced in Bangladesh no longer contained nitrofurans. Its use has been banned completely and the industry will be monitored to ensure that the drug is no longer used by farmers in fish feed to fatten the freshwater prawn, Bashar said.

DHL Invests \$10 Million To Enhance Services In Bangladesh

Dhaka, Bangladesh (AHN) - DHL on Wednesday announced a new joint venture investment of US\$10 million over the next few years to enhance its logistics capabilities in Bangladesh."South Asia remains a key sourcing, manufacturing and distribution base for the global fashion industry and the region offers tremendous growth for the fashion logistics sector," Amadou Diallo, chief executive officer of DHL South Asia Pacific, told reporters in Dhaka while announcing the investment.DHL signed a deal with its local associate, Trade Clippers Cargo, to form a company called DHL Global Forwarding Bangladesh."The investment in Bangladesh will go towards strengthening the joint venture, employee training, upgrading of information systems, enhancing, expanding the infrastructure and introducing a range of new services for businesses in Bangladesh," Mustaque Ahmed, managing director of DHL Bangladesh, said in a statement."Having established ourselves in Bangladesh for over 25 years, we have the local expertise and knowledge and the flexibility to tap into our global network and capacities over 220 countries and territories across the world," he added.As part of the investment, DHL also launched a "Fashion and Apparel Center of Excellence" in the capital of Dhaka to capitalize on the fashion logistics industry in South Asia. The total expenditure on logistics services in the region is estimated at \$3.9 billion annually

Accords with India hit at the base of Bangladesh'

Speakers at a discussion yesterday alleged that accords with India signed during the recent visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina hit the base of independence and sovereignty of the country. Addressing the discussion on 'Prime Minister's India Visit: Evaluation', organised by Sammilito Peshajibi Parishad at the Institution of Diploma Engineers, Bangladesh (IEDB), they said India signed the deals, which go against the interest of the country, to use Bangladesh to control its north-eastern region people who were fighting for independence and also to contain China. These accords must have to be withdrawn; otherwise people will resist the implementation of them.Engineer Mahmudur Rahman, convener of the parishad, presided over the programme which was addressed, among others, by Prof Dr Emajuddin Ahmed, Columnist Farhad Mazhar, former pro VC of DU AFM Yusuf Haider, Barrister Aminul Haque, former IEB president Engineer ANH Akhter Hossain, Press Club president Shaukat Mahmood, Journalist Ruhul Amin Gazi and MA Aziz, Agriculturist Anwar-un-Nabi Majumder, DU prof Dr Aminur Rahman Majumder, Principal Selim Bhuyan and Engineer Harun-Or-Rashid. Dr AZM Zahid Hossain, Member Secretary of the parishad, moderated the function. Dr Emajuddin Ahmed who addressed as chief guest, said that Bangladesh was forced to enter into the security block of India through the security deals with India. He said, these accords could hamper the internal security of Bangladesh.He was sharply critical of the prime minister for giving advance support to India for UN Security Council.Terming the accords as security and military treaty Farhad Mazhar said, India signed the deals, which go against the interest of the country, to use Bangladesh to control its north-eastern region people who were fighting for independence. He said, Bangladesh would not be able to present its any crisis at international forum if India became the member of UN Security Council. But it is regretting matter that the prime minister had already expressed her support to India, he said. Farhad Mazhar alleged that India wants to make Bangladesh as its battle field changing its military plan in the context of Maoist upcharge, Muslim-Maoist relation and independence movement of north-eastern region. Mahmudur Rahman said, the accords are nothing but the extension of the treaty of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on May 26, 1974

which hit at the base of the country's independence and sovereignty. Earlier, Shukat Mahmood in his keynote paper said 'we want to connect with the globe including India but not sacrificing our sovereignty and independence'

Bangladesh to buy 50,000 tonnes of white rice this year

DHAKA: Bangladesh's food and disaster management ministry has issued an international tender to buy 50,000 tonnes of white rice, plus or minus five percent, an official said on Tuesday. The bidding deadline is February 8 and shipment must take place within 60 days of contract signing, the ministry official said. Bidders may offer a minimum quantity of 10,000 tonnes, for delivery to the country's main port of Chittagong, on a cost, insurance and freight (CIF) basis. This is the first international tender Bangladesh has issued to buy rice this year. No official reason was given for the imports but market sources said it could be part of a government move to build food reserves after it failed to procure enough rice locally. "The government has a plan to import 300,000 tonnes of rice this fiscal year to shore up stocks," Pius Costa, head of the Directorate General of Food, told Reuters on Tuesday. The country, which imports around 2 million tonnes of wheat annually, recently also issued a series of international tenders to import wheat to replenish stocks. "In the current fiscal year, we have imported 100,000 tonnes of wheat out of targeted 750,000 tonnes and have already signed deals to buy 380,000 tonnes more," he said, without naming the firms. Traders say Bangladesh is buying more wheat this year because of lower global prices while domestic production is stagnating at around 1 million tonnes. The south Asian country produces around 30 million tonnes of rice, normally enough to feed its 150 million people, but often requires imports to cope with shortages due to natural calamities such as floods and droughts. Bangladesh had to import rice worth \$800 million in 2008. Despite a large crop and a good stocks, rice prices over the past few months have risen. In January the government extended until June a ban on rice exports to contain price increases.

north-east India develops, exports from Bangladesh will go up'

'Branchless banking' turning a reality in Bangladesh

Bangladesh Bank governor Atiur Rahman said Wednesday that the financial service providers and technology platforms can forge a partnership in extending branchless banking as brick-and-mortar bank branches have so far been unable to reach out for the majority of the population in a cost-effective manner. "The two together can devise and introduce innovative, cost-effective means to reach out to the population segments, which are still excluded from financial services," he said while addressing a conference in the city. The Bangladesh Bank (BB) governor was speaking at the meet titled 'Expanding Financial Services with New Technology' jointly organised by Department for International Development (DFID) and Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP). The governor stressed the potential partnership between financial service providers and technology platforms in replicating banks without branches or conducting remote delivery of financial services as traditional bank branches have so far been unable to serve the clients in a cost-effective manner. He said the country's six mobile phone companies with a 53 million subscribers' base at present have brought the entire country under comprehensive network coverage. "The steady growth in the number of mobile phones offers ample opportunity to the operators to engage in partnership with licensed and regulated financial service providers." "They can together reach out to the financially excluded population segments with payment, deposit and other services including

disbursement and recovery of loans," Atiur Rahman said. The BB chief said although technology is yielding high benefits in terms of scale efficiencies and cost savings, the appeal of 'brick-and-mortar bank branches' has not gone away. "Branchless banking is not an alternative, but a key supplement to enable traditional branch-banking for reaching out to new client segments in outlying rural or otherwise remoter locations, a priority for Bangladesh in pursuit of rapid inclusive growth with fullest possible financial inclusion," he said. Mr Rahman said branchless banking has for several decades been a tantalising and elusive promise of the fast-evolving information technology that financial service providers have eagerly been embracing. "But the cultural homogeneity and high population density in the country are features auguring well for success of a technology-driven thrust on branchless banking," he said.

The governor said the central bank is on the lookout for such creative partnerships in regulated IT-based remote delivery of financial services. He said a number of BB approved initiatives are already in operation to begin with, mainly in utility bill payments and in delivery of remittances from Bangladeshi workers abroad to their families at home. "People in scattered remote locations, working internal migrants sending money home, urbanites paying utility bills and other routine expenses like insurance premium and school fees can benefit from the partnership," he said. Senior citizens drawing pensions and social security benefits and the technophile young can all be expected to be avid users of financial services offered by branchless banking, he said. Dr Rahman said banks can employ technology-based branchless banking to disburse and recover loan instalments to and from small landholding farmers and rural non-farm enterprises cost effectively -- with only occasional field visits to brief borrowers and complete documentations. He believes expansion of branchless banking would to some extent ease the demand for cash currency notes, which are expensive to print, circulate and dispose of when no longer usable. Mr Rahman said branchless banking holds high promise in terms of business prospects and expanded customer base over a medium term, bringing broader benefits to the population and the overall economy. "We should start identifying viable roadmap options, aiming at full financial inclusion in Bangladesh by 2020 with optimal use of technology based branchless banking." Chris Austin, DFID country representative, said the device could reach a large number of people through use of innovative technologies. "Bangladesh is in a unique position to combine development with business offering a win-win solution for millions of poor." David Porteous, director of Bankable Frontier Associates, cited demography of the urban youth, government and spread of data-enabled mobile phones as possible forces towards expansion of technology-based banking services. Representatives from Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India also attended the conference.

Bangladesh sitting on HIV time-bomb

Bangladesh is sitting on a HIV time bomb that is ticking unheard in our midst. The bomb may be ticking very slowly now but could explode in near future, according to HIV/Aids experts. Health Minister AFM Ruhul Haque disclosed on World Aids Day that a total of 143 people were diagnosed with AIDS while 39 AIDS patients died across the country in last one year. The total number of HIV infected people in the country now stands at 1,745 while that of AIDS patients at 619. Some 204 AIDS patients died since the first HIV/AIDS patient was identified in the country in 1989, official sources said. The spread of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) may turn into epidemic as the virus is being

originated in the country apart from spreading through migrated people in recent years said former Vice Chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) Professor Dr Md Nazrul Islam. Male are infected more by HIV than woman in the country, he said adding if we could not prevent the virus from originating in the country, the ratio of male and female HIV infection would gradually become equal. BSMMU conducted a survey which revealed that 50 percent of male who came for HIV test at the university are students and 80 percent of them got it through mixing with prostitutes. Students who stay at Dormitories are more vulnerable to HIV infection than those living with families, he said adding that 75-85 percent people of the world get infected through sexual intercourse. Transmission of HIV usually occurs mainly through blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk from the infected people. Conversely, reluctance to use condom and abrupt use of syringe increase the risk of HIV infection and spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STD) in the country. Poverty ridden women, who engage in sex work, become more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and STD as sex buyers show reluctance to use condom. According to the latest serological surveillance it is found that the HIV infection among Injecting Drug Users (IDUs) in Dhaka is 7 percent and the epidemic in Dhaka is not uniformly distributed and is concentrated in one neighbourhood here 11 per cent of the IDU are HIV positive. There are about 40,000 drug addicts in the country and many of them are turning to pushing drugs with syringe and needle used by many. The government, however, as it appears, does not attach much importance to AIDS/HIV related issues as National AIDS Committee (NAC), did not meet even for once during the last three years. National body for AIDS of other countries of the world monitors, advocates, gives guidelines and formulates policies for different organizations and programmes of their respective countries. But NAC, the national body to monitor and implement national programs on HIV/AIDS, held its last meeting on HIV/AIDS in 2006. No meeting of the committee was held during the two years of the caretaker government, UNAIDS source said. National AIDS/STD Programme (NASP) also does not get the attention it deserves. The programme is not an integrated one rather running as a part of development programme under the Directorate General of Health Services. NASP has so far published 7th round national serological surveillance report (the report revealed the scenario of HIV in the country) that was conducted during 2005-06. The 8th round national serological surveillance report that is based on information of July- December, 2007 is yet to be published, meaning that NASP runs its programme on backdated information and lacks any accountability". The work of NASP suffers following frequent changes in leadership a NASP high-up said adding it should be empowered. An official of UNAIDS however, expressed doubt as regards proper implementation of NASP organogram. He said that the feasibility of the structure would take time as there is no allocation for NASP structure in the revenue budget. Health ministry would have to propose to the establishment ministry for approval of the structure which would also require the nod of the Finance Ministry.

4 million Muslims gather for prayer in Bangladesh By JULHAS ALAM

Some 4 million Muslims took part in a mass prayer in Bangladesh on Sunday, the final day of an annual three-day event that is among the world's largest religious gatherings. Tens of thousands walked overnight to reach the site of the World Congregation of Muslims, or Biswa Ijtema, with authorities closing access to the grounds to traffic until the final prayer was concluded Sunday afternoon. The gathering, held each year since

1966, aims to revive the tenets of Islam and promote peace through prayer. Biswa Ijtema, which shuns politics, has no history of violence, but security was tight, with watchtowers and security cameras installed around the 190-acre (77-hectare) grounds in the industrial town of Tongi. With nearly 20,000 security personnel keeping guard, President Zillur Rahman, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader Khaleda Zia attended the final prayer on the sandy banks of the River Turag, just north of the capital, Dhaka. Many devotees were overwhelmed by the gathering. "It's a sea of people," Mohammad Ramzan, a college student, told The Associated Press by phone from the scene. "This is huge. This is difficult to explain." A police official, Mizanur Rahman, estimated the final day's crowd at 4 million. About 87 percent of Bangladesh's 150 million people are Muslim. In addition to Bangladeshis, the gathering also attracted several thousands of foreigners from countries including the United States, Canada, India, Indonesia and Britain. During the three days, participants discussed the Quran and listened to sermons by Islamic scholars from around the world. Women are not allowed at the main venue, so instead gathered at nearby villages and stood on rooftops during the concluding prayer.

Auchan awards Bangladesh textiles freight management business to Agility

French retailer Groupe Auchan has appointed 323"Agility to handle the freight management of its textile business from Bangladesh to France, the global logistics provider announced yesterday (January 26). Agility said it would provide Auchan with a retail logistics solution including freight forwarding and destination services, as well as container utilisation management. The solution included consolidation services and the provision of detailed visibility at order and item level. "A dedicated team on the ground in Bangladesh provides cargo consolidation services for 40 Auchan suppliers," stated Agility. "Groupe Auchan will benefit greatly from higher visibility and efficiency, and thus reduced costs." The Auchan Group is said to be the world's 12th largest food retailer, operating in 13 countries and employing 210,000 people. The group is structured into four core businesses – hypermarkets (500 stores), supermarkets (745 stores), retail real estate (Immochan) and banking (Banque Accord). In 2008, the group reported pre-tax sales of €39.5bn, of which 80% was generated by its hypermarket business.

Removal of ban on export of BD jute to Pakistan urged

ISLAMABAD: The Federal Minister for Food and Agriculture Nazar Muhammad Gondal on Monday has requested the Bangladesh government to intervene in the matter of a ban on the export of jute to Pakistan, as it would adversely affect the packing of wheat and other agricultural commodities in the country. He said that the ban must be seen in the context of food security as without the jute packing bags the government would face immense difficulty in the storage of the upcoming wheat crop, particularly. The minister was talking to Acting High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Pakistan Sufi-ur-Rehman who called on the minister at his office on Monday. "Food Security cannot be ensured if the ban is not removed quickly," said the minister. Gondal also asked the high commissioner that the issue is quite crucial and needs an urgent consideration from the government of Bangladesh. He said that not only the local jute mills will suffer but also the wheat, rice and other agricultural products will badly suffer at the persistent ban on the export of raw jute from Bangladesh. The minister appreciated the high commissioner's proposal for working jointly in the value addition in the jute mills industry that would benefit both the brotherly countries. He further said that the

consignments already ready for shipments must be released soon to avert problem in the near future. Gondal further said that a delegation comprising both the public and private sector would soon visit Bangladesh to look into the matter and find ways and means to resolve the issue once for all. “Both the countries have ample potentials in the agricultural sector and can immensely benefit from each other. We need to find long-term solutions to our issues. We request the Bangladesh government to show exceptional flexibility for Pakistan,” said the minister.

Over 20,000 Bangladesh NGOs to lose registration

The registration of more than 20,000 non government organisations (NGOs) that have been inactive for years will be cancelled, a Bangladeshi minister has said. Social Welfare Minister Enamul Haque Mostafa Shahid told The Daily Star Monday: 'We shall cancel the registration of those organisations immediately.' 'Since we are committed to citizen's welfare, we can't allow any organisation to make people suffer in the name of volunteering.' Secretary of social welfare ministry Quomaran Nessa Khanam said the government will cancel registration of over 20,000 non-government organisations that remain inactive for several years. Social welfare officers visited the offices of those NGOs and found them inactive, said Khanam. 'After identifying inactive NGOs registered under the department of social welfare, we shall give them time to defend themselves and finally cancel the registration of the 'signboard NGOs', the official said. 'We shall cancel the registration of the NGOs that are running micro-credit scheme illegally despite submission of written commitment of not doing so.

India agrees to cede 17,000 acres to Bangladesh

At last India has decided to settle some of its dues with history with Bangladesh, by agreeing in principle to cede control over some 17,000 acres of territory as part of a larger, comprehensive agreement, in which the remaining tiny part of the 4,096 km-long boundary will be demarcated, while several pockets of adverse possessions and enclaves claimed by both sides are likely to be settled on an “as-is-where-is” basis. The decision to settle the matter is believed to have been taken at the highest political levels in India, on the eve of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s visit to India earlier this week, and is in keeping with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s view that small disagreements cannot be allowed to come in the way of a dynamic relationship with Delhi’s eastern neighbour. Home Secretary GK Pillai confirmed to Business Standard that India, during the home secretary-level talks in Dhaka in early December had offered such a comprehensive agreement to Dhaka – demarcating the remaining 6.1 km of the 4,096-km long boundary, plus settling the matter of adverse possessions and enclaves — and had received a positive response from the Bangladeshi government. India holds as many as 111 enclaves or tiny bits of land within Bangladesh territory, amounting to some 17,000 acres since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 (initially held by Pakistan, and after 1971, with Bangladesh), while Bangladesh holds some 51 enclaves amounting to about 7,000 acres in India. It is believed that India has in principle agreed that it will cede control over its enclaves, even though the difference is about 10,000 acres in Bangladesh’s favour. Meaning, once the negotiations are complete, the Indian enclaves within Bangladeshi territory would be absorbed within Bangladesh and vice-versa. Officials on both sides agreed that such a path-breaking agreement was on the cards, but it would take between 18-24 months to iron out the details. India needs a

constitutional amendment on its part to formalise the boundary demarcation. A joint land boundary working group meeting is expected to be held soon. In addition, both sides agreed during Hasina's visit that a flyover would be built to connect Bangladesh territory with the Angarpota-Dahagram enclave, separated by a tiny bit of land called the Teen Bigha corridor (literally, 3 bighas, or the size of a football field), so that Bangladeshis would have 24-hour access to their own territory. Since Bangladeshis can only exit and enter Angarpota-Dahagram from sunrise to sunset, as India controls the Teen Bigha corridor, the matter had snowballed into a huge issue within Bangladesh. "The India-Bangladesh relationship has been marred by such silliness over the last several decades, thereby casting a large shadow over the entire relationship," said noted South Asian analyst BG Verghese. Verghese pointed out that two Indian prime ministers, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, had in fact promised to their counterparts, erstwhile Pakistani prime minister Feroz Khan Noon in 1958 and Mujib-ur Rahman in 1974, in their respective land boundary agreements, that both sides would transfer or "exchange" these small bits of enclaves held in "adverse possession" by the other side. But nothing of the sort happened, as Left Front politics within West Bengal – some of the intervening pieces of land were said to be "controlled" by the Forward Bloc, even as litigants hit the courts seeking stays on the matter – prevented a diplomatic resolution. But with the UPA's second coming, and the Left Front out of the picture, Delhi has now decided that it will move to decisively resolve the matter, sources said. Sources pointed out that with Sheikh Hasina in power in Bangladesh, "a historic opportunity presented itself, and may not come again. It is better to resolve these issues now and make India-Bangladesh relations a model for South Asia." As for the demarcation of the 4,096-km boundary between the two countries (262 km in Assam, 443 km in Meghalaya, 2,216.7 km in West Bengal, 318 km in Mizoram and 856 km in Tripura), only 6.1 km remain to be demarcated, of which two parts are riverine and the third is a tiny piece of land. The riverine boundaries are related to the Mohuri and Sui rivers, both of which flow into Bangladesh from India, but whose ownership has been contested by both sides. While Delhi has offered that the median of the river be used to divide it up, the problem is that the river changes course every year as it floods the plain and therefore, the mid-point of the river changes as well. Over the last many years, Indian and Bangladeshi officials have contested ownership of the rivers, citing maps that date as long back as 1914. But with the new bonhomie between the two nations, it is now being said that these issues will also be quickly resolved.

Hope from Bangladesh: A secular subcontinent

The recent judgment by the Bangladesh Supreme Court last week in Dhaka as an operative secular democracy is terribly important and only a jaded elite tucked it away. The last of the Bismarckians thrive in the subcontinent and foreign policy treatments after the Fifties of the last century were not heard of. After dinner, Morgenthau and the Dominoes so popular in justifying Johnson's Vietnam policy are the standard stuff. When I was at JNU, some of the top international theorists visiting us were unheard of elsewhere. That ideas and ideals matter in international relations is taboo. Its only the South Africans who talk of solidarity any more. For our country at the age of sixty three, it is fashionable to be bored at the idea of change based on values and to think of it as a civilisational faultline.

Bangladesh is a favourite for many reasons. To a professional economist, it has always had the strongest tradition in the subcontinent. In its heyday, the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, while located in the Punjab, was led by stalwarts like Nurul Islam. They all went over to the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. There was Rehman Sobhan and Mosharraf Hossein

Bangladesh tiger plan aims to cut clashes with humans

DHAKA (Reuters) - Bangladesh launched on Monday a program to train field staff in the Sundarban forest, home to Bengal tigers, to prevent contacts between villagers and the animals that may lead to tragedy for both. Under a Bangladesh Tiger Action Plan, forest rangers and guards will learn to use tranquilizer guns to immobilize and capture tigers that stray from their normal habitat into human areas. Tapan Kumar Dey, a senior forestry official, told reporters human-tiger conflicts registered a rise in Bangladesh in recent years, resulting in the deaths of three tigers and 30 people in 2009. Dey said 193 people and 23 tigers have been killed in such encounters since 2000. Another tiger casualty was reported on Friday in the southern district of Satkhira, where villagers initially tried to scare off a five-year-old tigress but eventually captured her and beat her to death. The animal was the first tiger killed in Bangladesh this year, forestry officials said. The tigers of Sundarban, better known as Royal Bengal tigers, usually feed on deer and wild boars but often slip into villages on the fringe of the world's largest mangrove forest recently designated by the U.N. as a world heritage site -- to steal cows and goats from farmers' sheds. According to a survey by forest authorities in 2004, the Bangladesh part of the Sundarban, part of which lies in India, had 440 tigers.

SRILANKA

Change in Sri Lanka military ranks: Jan 30, Colombo: Commissioner General of Rehabilitation, Major General Daya Ratnayake has been appointed as the Chief of Staff of the Sri Lanka Army effective immediately. The current Chief of Staff, Major General Mendaka P. Samarasinghe has been transferred to the Joint Operations Headquarters (JOH) which coordinates the operations of the Sri Lanka Army with other two armed forces. Defence analysts however say more changes in the military ranks can be expected due to the politicization of the Army following the former military chief general Sarath Fonseka's entry into politics. The appointment of Major General Samarasinghe who is believed to be loyal to General Fonseka, to the JOH is one such change, they pointed out.

Commonwealth Expert Team says Sri Lanka elections well administered

Jan 28, Colombo: The international election monitoring groups, the Commonwealth Expert Team said the just concluded presidential elections in Sri Lanka is generally well-administered on election day but there were shortcomings in the pre-election period due to incidences of inter-party violence. Issuing a preliminary report the five-member Commonwealth team which was in the country since January 18 to observe the election process said the overall administrative arrangements for voting and counting have been well conducted. "The Commissioner for Elections and his staff across the country expended great effort to put in place procedures to ensure Sri Lankans were able to cast their ballots and the ballots were properly counted," their statement said. "There have been some reports of violent-incidents, notably in Northern Province, and malpractice in isolated areas, and we hope that all such instances are properly investigated. But based on our team reports and reports from other observers it appears that overall voting and counting have proceeded reasonably well in most areas," the monitors concluded. While

praising the proper administration of the elections, the group expressed concern over the pre-election violations and violence that marred the election campaign. "However, there is a compromised pre-election environment, including the election management body unable to fully ensure respect for the rule of law; a failure of some state institutions to respect legal provisions and guidelines; infractions of some campaign regulations; and, incidences of violence. Until such problems are addressed the electoral process in Sri Lanka will not fully meet key benchmarks for democratic elections," the Commonwealth team said in their preliminary report. The team is to compile its final detailed report which will include a series of recommendations for the administration to follow to strengthen the electoral process and the environment for the elections. Noting that the same recommendations have been made during previous elections by many international and national observer groups, the team urged the government to abide by the 17th Amendment to the Constitution and actually implement the changes suggested by the monitors. The five-member team of experts headed by the former Jamaican Foreign Minister Mr. K D Knight was constituted by the Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamallesh Sharma at the invitation of the Sri Lanka Elections Commissioner. The other members of the team include Ms. Cynthia Barrow-Giles, a lecturer in Political Science at the University of the West Indies, Barbados, St Lucia, Mr. Subba Rao Ilapavuluri, Chief Electoral Officer of Andhra Pradesh, India, Ms. Jane Michuki, a lawyer from Kenya, and Mr. Tim Neale, a Media Expert from the UK.

shadow over bitter Sri Lanka poll

Pre-dawn bomb blasts in Sri Lanka's Tamil heartland escalated tensions as the country went to the polls Tuesday in the first presidential election since the end of its 37-year civil war.

Sri Lankan detainees have gathered on an oval and are refusing to return to their compounds. Federal Immigration Minister Chris Evans says a peaceful protest by Sri Lankan detainees on Christmas Island will do little to help their cause. Senator Evans says he has been told that 133 detainees are protesting against the time it is taking to process their claims, but activist groups put the number at more than 350. They have gathered on an oval and in the recreational area and are refusing to go back to their compounds. But Senator Evans says the peaceful protest will not speed up the process. "I want to make it very clear to them and to the community ... we're not going to be responding to this," he said. "What we are going to do is ensure proper process is followed - that is people have to have had their health, identity and security checks and then they have to have been successful in their application for protection." But a spokesman for the Refugee Action Coalition, Ian Rintoul, says the protest may continue until changes are made. "I think the protest will keep happening. They're determined to keep some level of protest now until they get proper answers from the department," he said. "There's been some talk of initiating a protest hunger strike to indicate just how serious they are that something has to happen on Christmas Island." Mr Rintoul says the protesters are holding signs which say 'how long do we have to wait, Oceanic Viking six weeks, Christmas Island six months'. "There's a longer and longer wait. There's probably about 150, 160 Tamils now that are six months or longer, some much longer," Mr Rintoul said. Senator Evans says most claims are processed within 100 days, but admitted some of the Sri Lankans were being forced to wait longer. "The Tamils in particular from Sri Lanka are taking a bit

longer to get their security clearances, because obviously there are concerns following the civil war in Sri Lanka and the movement of a lot of LTTE operatives out of Sri Lanka," he said. "So those processes are under way. We have had many of them cleared, but it is taking a bit longer." "Visa factory" The protest coincides with a visit to the island by Opposition immigration spokesman Scott Morrison and Family First Senator Steve Fielding. Mr Morrison says Christmas Island's detention centre is "running on overdrive" because the product on offer is too good. "I believe what we have here is a visa factory," he said. "We are basically manufacturing opportunities for people to gain access to a protection visa in advance of those who are sitting in camps around the world." Senator Fielding says more boats will continue to arrive unless the island's facilities are made less attractive, but Christmas Island Shire president Gordon Thomson described the comments as insensitive and derogatory. "I've just read the comments of Senator Fielding and Scott Morrison and they're a bit sickening actually," he said. "It's opportunistic politics and inflammatory language and I see some of their comments, likening the conditions to be motel conditions - I mean, these people are being kept in a prison." Expectations raised Mr Morrison says the latest protest by detainees is due to the Government's mixed messages about border control. He says the detainees' expectations have been raised by the Government's relocation of those on board the Oceanic Viking earlier this month. "We need strong border protection. We need [to make sure] people making assessments on whether people come to this country have the time available to do those checks," he said. "They don't need the difficulty of people having raised expectations by poor decisions and special deals by a Government that basically doesn't know what it's doing on border control." But Mr Rintoul says the detainees' dissatisfaction is not simply due to hearing about the treatment of asylum seekers from the Oceanic Viking. "Many of the people have been there long before the Oceanic Viking was on the political horizon and their expectations are to be dealt with as human beings, and for their applications to be processed as quickly as possible," Mr Rintoul said. "The Oceanic Viking has highlighted the difference, the possibilities of processing to be done in six weeks." It's highlighted the possibility. It hasn't raised their expectations."

Sri Lanka bourse edges up ahead of polls; rupee slips

COLOMBO, Jan 25 (Reuters) - Sri Lankan shares .CSE gained 0.64 percent on Monday led by local buying with volatility a day before the presidential poll, dealers said.

The All-Share Price Index .CSE of the Colombo Stock Exchange closed 22.72 points firmer at 3,554.45 points. It hit a record high of 3586.68 on Monday. "The market is up. There was substantial local buying. They were taking positions before the election," said Prasanna Chandrasekera, associate director at Asia Securities in Colombo. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa is facing a stiff challenge from his former army chief, General Sarath Fonseka, who oversaw the defeat of the separatist Tamil Tiger rebels, at the Jan. 26 presidential poll. Analysts expect a close finish. For Sri Lanka's political risks, see [ID:nSGE5BE023] The day's turnover was 1.5 million rupees (\$13.12 million), more than twice of 2009 daily average of 593.6 million rupees. The rise was led by the diversified holdings sector .CSEDV due to 2.43 percent gain in Carson Cumberbat CARS.CM. Shares in conglomerate John Keells Holdings JKH.CM after the market closed posted a 49 percent rise in net profit in quarter ended December 31

Indian Army chief mad **Jakarta**-After staying in Riau's immigration detention center for almost three months, all 78 Sri Lankan immigrants, who had earlier been `rescued` by

Australia's customs vessel Oceanic Viking, have finally left Riau, for third countries, either Australia, Canada or New Zealand. Escorted by Indonesian foreign ministry and Australian embassy officials, the last batch of the immigrants left Riau on Wednesday (Jan. 20). The 16 immigrants were flown to Jakarta before proceeding to Australia and the Philippines. "They are the last batch of a total of 78 Sri Lankan immigrants who were accommodated at the Tanjungpinang immigration detention center after they had to get off the Australian vessel Oceanic Viking," Samsu Rizal, an Indonesian foreign ministry official, said in Tanjungpinang, Riau Province, "Three of them will be flown to Melbourne, Australia, and 13 others to the Philippines from Jakarta," Samsu Rizal said. Jakarta (ANTARA News) - After staying in Riau's immigration detention center for almost three months, all 78 Sri Lankan immigrants, who had earlier been 'rescued' by Australia's customs vessel Oceanic Viking, have finally left Riau, for third countries, either Australia, Canada or New Zealand. Escorted by Indonesian foreign ministry and Australian embassy officials, the last batch of the immigrants left Riau on Wednesday (Jan. 20). The 16 immigrants were flown to Jakarta before proceeding to Australia and the Philippines. "They are the last batch of a total of 78 Sri Lankan immigrants who were accommodated at the Tanjungpinang immigration detention center after they had to get off the Australian vessel Oceanic Viking," Samsu Rizal, an Indonesian foreign ministry official, said in Tanjungpinang, Riau Province, Wednesday (Jan. 20). "Three of them will be flown to Melbourne, Australia, and 13 others to the Philippines from Jakarta," Samsu Rizal said. Jakarta (ANTARA News) - After staying in Riau's immigration detention center for almost three months, all 78 Sri Lankan immigrants, who had earlier been 'rescued' by Australia's customs vessel Oceanic Viking, have finally left Riau, for third countries, either Australia, Canada or New Zealand. Escorted by Indonesian foreign ministry and Australian embassy officials, the last batch of the immigrants left Riau on Wednesday (Jan. 20). The 16 immigrants were flown to Jakarta before proceeding to Australia and the Philippines. "They are the last batch of a total of 78 Sri Lankan immigrants who were accommodated at the Tanjungpinang immigration detention center after they had to get off the Australian vessel Oceanic Viking," Samsu Rizal, an Indonesian foreign ministry official, said in Tanjungpinang, Riau Province, Wednesday (Jan. 20). "Three of them will be flown to Melbourne, Australia, and 13 others to the Philippines from Jakarta," Samsu Rizal said. The 13 immigrants headed to the Philippines still had to complete their travel documents before proceeding to New Zealand to resettle, he said. "One thing is clear; they are leaving Indonesia for third countries," he said. Earlier,

15 of the 78 Sri Lankans had been transferred to Canada on December 19. Sujatmiko, the foreign ministry's director of diplomatic security, said, the 15 Sri Lankans were an extended family consisting of children, adult women and men. Thirty four more in late December were deported to Australia. "All of the 34 Sri Lanka immigrants left Tanjung Pinang for Batam and took a direct flight to Australia," he said. Director of diplomatic security at the Foreign Ministry Sujatmiko said then the Australian government had earlier promised the immigrants permission to stay in Australia if they had papers confirming their refugee status from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The deportation of Sri Lanka refugee in Indonesia to Canada and Australia, he added, was part of the Australian government's initiative. He explained the 78 Sri Lankans were allowed to stay on Indonesian territory for some time because Indonesia wanted to help Australia overcome the problem they posed after they were caught trying to reach Australian shores in rickety boats. "But this will be the last time we are helping Australia deal with its foreign refugee influx problem," Sujatmiko said adding that Indonesia did not incur any expenditures for the deportation since all the related costs were borne by the United Nations. "Indonesia is also not receiving any material profit from this case," he said. The 78 Sri Lankans had been nabbed by the Australian authorities during their journey to Christmas island last October 18, 2009. After reportedly receiving 'the green light' from Indonesian authorities, the Oceanic Viking with the 78 Sri Lanka refugees aboard, cast anchor in waters near Cempedak Island, Bintan District, Riau Islands Province, Sumatra, on October 26, 2009. Australian authorities had hoped the asylum seekers could then be transferred to Tanjungpinang immigration detention center - a way out which people in Australia promptly referred to as the 'Indonesian solution'. The 78 Sri Lanka asylum seekers had in the beginning refused to leave MV Oceanic Viking and insisted they should be taken to Australia. They threatened suicide if forced to disembark in Indonesia. As the standoff continued, the Indonesian authorities had allowed the Australian ship to stay in Sumatran waters until November 6, and later it had been extended to November 13, 2009. Later on, the refugees had been finally willing to leave the boat and be transferred by Mutiara Emas ferry to Tanjungpinang where they would be accommodated at an immigration detention center after being persuaded that they might be granted refugee status after getting refugee status letters from UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) officers in Riau Islands Province. The asylum seekers had been given a promise that they would be able to stay in Australia if they got letters confirming that they were refugees. Last October 2009, Indonesia did two favors to Australia regarding Sri Lankan asylum seekers intending to go to Australia. First, it was on October 11, when Indonesia's Navy intercepted a boat with about 255 Sri Lankans aboard and took them to Merak harbor, Banten. Second, it was when Indonesia agreed to take the group of 78 asylum seekers from Sri Lanka, from the Oceanic Viking ship which had picked them on Oct. 18 after sending out a distress signal in Indonesia's search and rescue zone. Indonesia is not a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention, meaning asylum seekers in this country are processed by the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration and forced to wait - many of them for many years - to be resettled in a third country. Boat people heading to Australia are often regarded by both Indonesia and Australia as illegal migrants or a people smuggling problem. The fact is that most of them are those trying to escape armed conflicts in their countries, especially Afghanistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Despite the departure of

the 78 refugees, it seems that the foreign immigrant problem is still far from over. The more than 250 Sri Lankans are still staying in a boat which cast anchor in Merak waters. One of the refugees who was identified as Yakob, died of illness recently. Up to now, their future is still uncertain. Last January 4, Police in Bintan in the Sumatran Kepulauan Riau province arrested 11 Sri Lankan immigrants consisting of seven male adults, two female adults and two children. They claimed that they had come from Malaysia. "We caught them hiding on the edge of Nirwana Garden Coastal Resort at around 6am," the head of the Bintan resort police, Adjunct Senior Commissioner Yohanes Widodo said recently. Jakarta (ANTARA News) - After staying in Riau's immigration detention center for almost three months, all 78 Sri Lankan immigrants, who had earlier been 'rescued' by Australia's customs vessel Oceanic Viking, have finally left Riau, for third countries, either Australia, Canada or New Zealand. Escorted by Indonesian foreign ministry and Australian embassy officials, the last batch of the immigrants left Riau on Wednesday (Jan. 20). The 16 immigrants were flown to Jakarta before proceeding to Australia and the Philippines. "They are the last batch of a total of 78 Sri Lankan immigrants who were accommodated at the Tanjungpinang immigration detention center after they had to get off the Australian vessel Oceanic Viking," Samsu Rizal, an Indonesian foreign ministry official, said in Tanjungpinang, Riau Province, Wednesday (Jan. 20). "Three of them will be flown to Melbourne, Australia, and 13 others to the Philippines from Jakarta," Samsu Rizal said. The 13 immigrants headed to the Philippines still had to complete their travel documents before proceeding to New Zealand to resettle, he said. "One thing is clear; they are leaving Indonesia for third countries," he said. Earlier, 15 of the 78 Sri Lankans had been transferred to Canada on December 19. Sujatmiko, the foreign ministry's director of diplomatic security, said, the 15 Sri Lankans were an extended family consisting of children, adult women and men. Thirty four more in late December were deported to Australia. "All of the 34 Sri Lanka immigrants left Tanjung Pinang for Batam and took a direct flight to Australia," he said. Director of diplomatic security at the Foreign Ministry Sujatmiko said then the Australian government had earlier promised the immigrants permission to stay in Australia if they had papers confirming their refugee status from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The deportation of Sri Lanka refugee in Indonesia to Canada and Australia, he added, was part of the Australian government's initiative. He explained the 78 Sri Lankans were allowed to stay on Indonesian territory for some time because Indonesia wanted to help Australia overcome the problem they posed after they were caught trying to reach Australian shores in rickety boats. "But this will be the last time we are helping Australia deal with its foreign refugee influx problem," Sujatmiko said adding that Indonesia did not incur any expenditures for the deportations since all the related costs were borne by the United Nations. "Indonesia is also not receiving any material profit from this case," he said. The 78 Sri Lankans had been nabbed by the Australian authorities during their journey to Christmas island last October 18, 2009. After reportedly receiving 'the green light' from Indonesian authorities, the Oceanic Viking with the 78 Sri Lanka refugees aboard, cast anchor in waters near Cempedak Island, Bintan District, Riau Islands Province, Sumatra, on October 26, 2009. Australian authorities had hoped the asylum seekers could then be transferred to Tanjungpinang immigration detention center - a way out which people in Australia promptly referred to as the 'Indonesian solution'. The 78 Sri Lanka asylum seekers had in the beginning

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Lanka polls: Will India gain with Rajapaksa's win?

K Venkataraman, TOI Crest, 30 January 2010, No country's role is more discussed and less understood in Sri Lanka than India's. With the island nation electing Mahinda Rajapaksa as president for a second six-year term, there is bound to be much debate in Colombo on what the result means for India, and whether India "won" or "lost" in the process. Perennial political legend has it that India has specific preferences about who rules in Sri Lanka and that its choice reflects its geo-strategic interests of the moment. Nothing could be farther from the truth. There are two dominant theories on India's perceived intent surrounding this election. One goes that India wanted retired soldier Sarath Fonseka to win because the old warhorse, Mahinda Rajapaksa, was galloping towards China at a pace too alarming for India. And the second theory is that India is uncomfortable with a former army general suddenly entering the political arena, taking over the administration and setting the stage for military rule in civilian garb. Proponents of the first theory hold that India and its strategic ally, the United States, are worried about China's growing presence in Sri Lanka. They see something in Rajapaksa's attempt

to neutralise India's political interest in boosting the minority Tamil cause. The fact that Fonseka was backed by the main opposition United National Party led by Ranil Wickremesinghe, a man seen as pro-India and pro-West, besides the Tamil National Alliance and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the main minority parties, favours this theory. On the flip side, the view is that India is enamoured of Rajapaksa for promising an achievable political solution to Tamils in a postconflict era, and had even attempted to earn their support for his campaign. And that the attempts only failed when Tamils decided to back Fonseka. Even when not suggesting that India would prefer one above the other, analysts identify the Rajapaksa camp with China's interests and contend that this factor may have made India more favourably disposed towards Fonseka. "While it is unlikely Sri Lanka will actively alienate its northern neighbour, it is equally unlikely the Rajapaksa government will continue to woo India in the future, particularly if its alliance with China bears fruit," wrote Dr Kasun Ubayasiri, an analyst of the Sri Lankan scene, for the South Asia Analysis Group days before the polls. Rajapaksa's "return to power will benefit China's strategic interests in the region," he added, contending that Fonseka was more alive to India's predicament. Fonseka had after the war said weapons came primarily from China and Pakistan. He had avoided naming India. Such developments have landed the former officer "on the Indian side of the future battle line," Ubayasiri argued. It is a fact that Sri Lanka won the war because of India's moral and diplomatic support, especially as the main guarantor of its territorial unity. And despite its humanitarian concerns and frequent appeals for avoiding civilian casualties, India remained steadfast in not calling for a halt to military operations against the LTTE. Rajapaksa has acknowledged India's contribution to his victory. With the incumbent returning to power, there will be continuity in bilateral relations with India. Meanwhile, China's status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council makes it invaluable, its sheer presence insulating the island nation from any adverse Security Council resolution. A UN Human Rights Council resolution seeking to censure Sri Lanka and call for a war crimes probe against it last June was defeated, with India joining China and Russia, among other nations, in support of Colombo. Both Beijing and New Delhi are engaged in development work. Thus, regardless of who holds office, the Sri Lankan president has good reason to engage the two countries with equal zeal, bearing in mind the respective sensitivities. Many, however, say that India, on its part, needs to be vigilant about the growing Chinese influence in Sri Lanka, especially after it emerged a key supplier of arms and military equipment that helped troops defeat the LTTE. In recent years, it has been clear that Sri Lankan diplomacy will make extensive use of Colombo's proximity to Beijing to counter India's pressure for a political solution to the Tamil question. A significant issue in the post-conflict era is that Sri Lanka does not have urgent and critical military requirement that would leave India worrying about Beijing entrenching itself in the island with its uninhibited defence supplies. China's interest in the island is mainly strategic. "Strategically, China perhaps wants to cultivate Sri Lanka as a friendly cockpit for its Indian Ocean defence as China's vital shipping lanes are dominated by Sri Lanka," says Col (ret'd) R Hariharan, a military analyst observing the region for long. "Moreover, Sri Lanka, because of its geographic location, is the southern vanguard of India's strategic defence. As India is the major competing power in the South Asian region, China would like to strengthen its presence in India's neighbourhood." New Delhi has been criticised for not taking adequate notice of the Chinese policy of

'encirclement' of India as it scaled up its presence in the neighbourhood through infrastructure projects. China, for instance, is developing the Hambantota port in southern Sri Lanka and funding Norochcholai power plant near Puttalam on its south-western coast. Hariharan has suggested India could balance the Chinese influence by developing Trincomalee, a coastal city in the east, with a natural harbour. In the mid-1980s, it was the possibility of the US getting a foothold in Trincomalee that led to India getting entangled in the Sri Lankan conflict. In the 1987 Indo-Lanka accord, it ensured Trincomalee remained in its sphere of influence when it added provisions to the effect that it will have the first right of refusal if Colombo wanted to refurbish its 102 oil tanks of World War II vintage in the eastern town. In 2002, the Ranil Wickremesinghe government handed over the entire tank fleet to India. India knows well that no Sri Lankan ruler is going to stop using the China card. In fact, there are many in Sri Lanka who believe that China's presence is an incentive for New Delhi to retain its positive outlook towards Colombo. But equally true is India's uncompromising commitment to Sri Lanka's unity on the one hand and to ensuring political equality and dignity for Tamils within a united country on the other. Of course, Tamils on either side of the Palk Strait are unhappy that during the worst and most brutal phase of the war India failed to go beyond the strategic 'Lakshman rekha' - the limit imposed by the theory that too much of pressure on Colombo to halt the war would seriously damage its bilateral ties, much to the advantage of players waiting to move in like China. But in the ultimate analysis, the demise of the Tamil Tigers was an outcome of India's policy of mixing overt non-interference with quiet support. So was the unforeseen end of the armed conflict. Other powers may stay or leave Sri Lanka, but India cannot rest. It bears the burden of keeping a watch on the rising tide of Sinhala nationalism so that a political solution is not delayed forever. China or no China, India stands on a different footing in Sri Lanka. It has a long 'things-to-do' list. These include rehabilitation and development, such as restoring the railway network in the north, rendering humanitarian help in the area of demining, and fostering livelihood activities and vocational training for the Tamil youth. It has towards that signed an agreement to revive the railway network in the north with a \$425 million line of credit. Besides, it is spending Rs 500 crore on post-war development with a focus on agriculture and housing. New Delhi is confident these will not go unnoticed. A HELPING HAND India has sent 2.5 lakh family packs from Tamil Nadu containing dry ration, clothing, utensils to internally displaced persons when they were in post-war camps New Delhi set up an emergency field hospital with 60 medical and paramedical staff for six months between March and September in the war zone. It treated 50,000 people, many requiring surgeries The government set apart Rs 500 crore for rehabilitation and welfare of IDPs Six Indian de-mining teams are currently working in Sri Lanka's former war zones It sent nearly 3000 tonnes of shelter material Indian agencies are also engaged in project to help vulnerable people like war widows Engineers from India are engaged in capacity building and vocational training for Tamils of Indian origin in the hill country CALCULATED RISKS Under a \$425 million line of credit, two railway tracks are to be laid by India's IRCON in the north - one from Omanthai to Pallai and another from Madhu to Talaimannar RITES India to provide rolling stock for these railway projects

Sri Lankan stocks open lower after poll

Jan 28, 2010 (LBO) - Sri Lanka stocks fell 0.5 percent, soon after opening Thursday after incumbent president Mahinda Rajapaksa returned to power for a second six-year term as the market went through a correction, brokers said. In early morning trade the All Share Price Index (ASPI) was trading at 3,532.25 points, down 1.65 percent (59.13 points), while the Milanka index of more liquid stocks slumped 1.57 percent (64.62 points). Incumbent president Mahinda Rajapaksa beat his main challenger retired military general Sarath Fonseka at presidential polls held two years ahead of schedule. Fonseka was backed by the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the main opposition United National Party, which has a strong record for economic reform and, after 2002, for fiscal prudence. Fonseka in fact promised a public sector salary hike four times as large as the ruling administration. Central Bank governor Nivard Cabraal said the administration, armed with a strong mandate was committed to fiscal consolidation after ending an internal war in 2009. "We have committed ourselves to a certain consolidation path," he said. "We are not digressing." Cabraal has already unveiled a monetary policy roadmap aimed at keeping inflation low and the exchange rate steady and warned against 'reckless spending.' Conglomerate John Keells Holdings was trading at 175.00 rupees, up 75 cents, while alcohol manufacturer Sri Lanka Distilleries Company was trading at 113.25 rupees, down 5.25. Commercial Bank was trading at 185.50 rupees, down 4.25, Hatton National Bank was trading at 174.00 rupees, down 50 cents, Sampath Bank 215.50 rupees, down 2.00 and Seylan Bank was trading at 41.00 rupees, down 75 cents at early morning trade. Activated carbon manufacturer Haycarb, a unit of diversified Hayleys Group was trading at 186.00 rupees, down 8.00. Environmental Resources was trading at 120.00 rupees, down 5.25, while its W0000 was trading at 91.00 rupees, down 1.25 and W0001 was trading at 90.00 rupees, down 75 cents. Dialog Telekom, a mobile operator, was trading flat at 6.75 rupees, and Sri Lanka Telecom was trading at 41.50 rupees,

Sri Lanka's opposition yet to decide on fighting polls jointly

Colombo Sri Lanka's opposition, which united to put up a joint Presidential candidate, is yet to decide on repeating the experience during the forthcoming parliamentary elections due in April this year. "We will take a decision on fighting the election jointly after the parliamentary elections are announced," the main opposition United National Party General Secretary Tissa Attanayake told reporters today. Attanayake said Fonseka would involve himself in politics and was ready to face any challenge. Meanwhile, the ruling United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA) is gearing for the parliamentary polls. According to sources, President Mahinda Rajapaksa is likely to dissolve Parliament next month. A senior minister and General Secretary of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Maithripala Sirisena, said preparation were already on for the parliamentary elections. "We will appoint the nomination board this week and call for applications from party members seeking nominations," Sirisena said. He dismissed claims being made by some opposition groups that the government was thinking of extending the term of parliament by holding a referendum, the Daily Mirror reported. Sirisena said that more than anyone else, the government was keen to dissolve Parliament. The government needs a two-third majority and we are going to achieve this with the assistance of all the constituent parties and groups that support the UPFA government, he said. The government is keen to dissolve Parliament as early as possible and go before the voter to obtain a strong mandate, he added. The government is ready to face the challenge including that of finding a durable solution to the ethnic issue and achieving speedy

economic progress, the newspaper quoted Sirisena as saying. "The government expects to introduce a new Constitution that fulfils the aspirations of all Sri Lankans and to establish durable peace and harmony among all communities. "Political stability was essential in the country to carry out the economic and political programmes of the government during the next six years," he said.

As Sri Lanka Expels Journalists and Raids Opposition, UN's Ban Relieved Still

UNITED NATIONS, January 29 -- As Sri Lankan soldiers surrounded opposition candidate Sarath Fonseka on January 27, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon told the Press he was "relieved" by results in Sri Lanka. Inner City Press had asked about irregularities in the voting results asserted from many quarters. Mr. Ban did not comment on these. In the two days since, the incumbent Rajapaksa administration has moved forward to expel and deny visas to journalists asking about election irregularities, and has raised Fonseka's office while making threats of arrest. On January 29, Inner City Press asked the UN's Associate Spokesman Farhan Haq if Ban is still relieved, in the face of the expulsion of journalists and raiding of political opponents. Video here, from Minute 12:03. "He still is relieved," Haq said, that election day went relatively peacefully. Haq then read out the same canned "appeal to abide by rules" which Ban delivered in person in response to Inner City Press' question on January 27. Obviously, that "appeal" had no effect, as the administration of Mahinda Rajapaksa, whom Ban calls a friend, has since then further cracked down on opponents and independent media. To the contrary, it would appear that Ban's January 27 statement that he was "relieved," the same word used by Rajapaksa, served as a green light to move from relief to further repression. Ban has set sail to London, Cyprus and Ethiopia. It is unclear if he will take questions on, or unprompted speak about, Rajapaksa's crackdown in Sri Lanka. Watch this site.

While the UN's Ban Ki-moon is "still relieved," according to RSF: Police today arrested Chandana Sirimalwatta, the editor of Lanka... The president's brother, defence minister Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, threatened to burn the newspaper down a few days ago. Soldiers took up position on 26 January around and inside the buildings that house two privately-owned TV stations, Sirasa and Swarnavahini, in Colombo. Plain-clothes men using a car with the license plate 32/ 84 32 placed seals yesterday evening over the entrance to the office of the Lankaenews website. Men searched the office earlier in the day. The website itself has been rendered inaccessible for the past few days by the state telecommunications company Sri Lanka Telecom. Reporter Karin Wenger of the Swiss public radio station DRS is facing possible deportation on 1 February following the withdrawal of her press accreditation. She said, "I think this decision is linked to the questions I asked an official during a news conference after the results were announced." Soldiers roughed up photographers working for foreign news agencies when they tried to attend a news conference given by Gen. Fonseka yesterday. One was forced to delete the photos on his camera's memory card. Soldiers also prevented journalists from working freely near a hotel being used by Fonseka the previous day.

Sri Lanka's wildlife sanctuary sites reopened for tourism

Two of Sri Lanka's renowned wildlife sanctuary sites were reopened on Saturday after years of closure because of the conflict between the government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels, a government official said. Ananda Wijesuriya, director of the Wildlife Conservation Department said the two sites were opened to the public on Saturday were

located at southeastern and eastern parts of the island. Kumana, a bird sanctuary and a main eco-tourism attraction, is 312 km southeast of the Colombo while Lahugala, a wildlife park/ sanctuary reserve, is 318 km east of the capital. They have been shut for tourists since 2005 when the fighting between the two sides escalated. Both areas were under security clouds due to clashes until May last year when the rebels were defeated. "After the end of the war we received security clearance," Wijesuriya said. The end to the civil conflict has made Sri Lanka a major tourism attraction, the tourism authority said.

Sri Lanka inflation hits 11-month high in Jan

COLOMBO, Jan 28 (Reuters) - Sri Lanka's annual inflation hit a 11-month high in January due to a low base effect, rising consumer spending on the back of low interest rates, and high food prices, data showed on Thursday. The January consumer prices rose to 6.5 percent, its highest since February, edging up from last month's 4.8 percent. It hit a record high of 28.2 percent in June 2008 due to high oil prices. "Prices of food commodities recorded increase trend due to the less supply of agricultural consumer goods -- main producing areas," the Department of Census and Statistics said in a statement. The food index, which accounts for more than 45 percent of the consumer price index, has risen 0.75 percent compared to last year, the data showed. The 12-month moving average inflation slowed to a fresh record low of 3.1 percent, from 3.4 percent in December. It hit a 6-year high of 23.4 percent in October, 2008. Economists surveyed by Reuters had forecast December CPI inflation at 6.0 percent while annual average inflation was seen at 3 percent. Analysts said inflation will pick up continuously due to base effect and rising consumer spending due to low interest rates on post-war economic optimism.

Sri Lanka's real human rights record

With its false accusations The recent Guardian article by a Human Rights Watch officer exemplifies what EM Forster described as the world of telegrams and anger. Today, he would have used the term "soundbite", and this is what HRW has engaged in relentlessly against Sri Lanka, with no attention to accuracy, nor to engagement. This is not the first time we have found HRW seeking to further its own agenda by adopting a selective approach to evidence. Not only this, but it seems ready to overlook the real progress that is taking place in Sri Lanka. Before outlining the key plans we are undertaking to improve Sri Lanka for the benefit of all, let me provide some background on our own grievances against HRW. In 2007, HRW issued a press release referring to "indiscriminate attacks on civilians", regarding a report about the liberation of Sri Lanka's eastern province from terrorists. The report only cited a single example of civilian casualties in these operations, and our forces, in granting this, explained that it had happened because of their use of mortar-locating radar. The HRW report conceded that the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) had used weaponry in a civilian encampment, but claimed that this was not heavy weaponry and therefore they could not be held responsible. After one casuistic reply to our reasoned protest, they stopped answering letters. After one meeting with a new representative in Geneva in September 2007, we were promised a response, but none was forthcoming. Since then, HRW has avoided discussion altogether, refusing to meet government representatives in Geneva, cancelling a meeting in the House of Commons when it heard the Sri Lankan government was sending someone who would refute its allegations. It claimed to our High Commission that it did not want to be

"rubbished", but the way to avoid being rubbished is to refrain from lies, not dodge reasoned discussion. Typically, while refusing to talk – quite unlike Amnesty International, which readily discusses problems at length – in 2008, HRW issued a glossy booklet that claimed abductions were on the increase in Sri Lanka. This report distorted the reality: it contained only three examples from 2007, with the rest of the 90-odd cases recorded dating from 2006. We accept there were problems in 2006, largely arising from diminishing LTTE domination following years in which it had freely killed members of Tamil groups opposed to them – their claim to represent Tamils clearly did not extend to those who challenged their supremacy. By 2007 however the situation was better and, in the last couple of years, instances of abduction have fallen still further – though even a single case is one too many and we are working to prevent this in its entirety. Now, with regard to the pronouncements of Philip Alston, the UN independent expert who explained to me why he feels obliged to "behave like a bulldog" towards Sri Lanka, HRW pronounces on a controversial video on which he bases his report that the "government has consistently claimed the video is fake, without providing any evidence that the gruesome scene was staged or the footage tampered with." This is simply untrue. Even Alston's three experts declare that a moving leg of a supposedly dead person is strange. The experts note, too, that there "are unexplained characteristics of this file, the most troubling of which appears in the final 17 frames of video", while they are equally unable to explain why the date on the footage is six months later than the incident was supposed to have taken place (and after the battle had been concluded). The claim that there may be a legitimate explanation remains simply a claim, with no effort to justify it. Thankfully, the UN secretary general, Ban Ki-Moon, has adopted a more measured approach. Earlier this month, Ban distanced himself from the report – something not as widely reported as Alston's claims – suggesting that Alston "acted alone" and that his report does not represent the view of the United Nations. We are also accused of refusing to investigate allegations of human rights abuses. And yet this is precisely what we are doing. In response to the US State Department report, presented in a balanced manner last October, on alleged incidents during the military action last year, President Rajapaksa appointed an independent commission to investigate. The report will be provided in April. The problem with all this sound and fury is that it detracts from the real problems with human rights issues that Sri Lanka does face, and to which it can now devote attention. While it could be argued that the authoritarianism of the government of the 1980s contributed to the growth of terrorist movements, this cannot be said of more recent administrations. None the less, the first priority of government had been to ensure security and defeat terrorism once and for all. Alongside this, we have moved apace on much-needed reforms, which are now being introduced to the north and east. In consultation with the police authorities, we have helped with reinforcing training programmes to enforce rights that suffered during a decade of increased recruitment. The new inspector-general of police has begun a policy of improving women and children's desks in areas of particular vulnerability and, through the ministry of child development and women's rights, we are strengthening community structures to enhance protection capacity. During the relative quiet of election day, I was able to go through the draft action plan for human rights, a monumental effort by eight consultative committees, including some of the most vociferous critics of government. We were also able, last November, to present to the president, fulfilling an earlier campaign pledge, a proposed bill of rights, prepared by a

group of independent experts who consisted of four Sinhalese, two Tamils and two Muslims. The ministry – before I became its secretary – had picked eight admirably qualified people, who represent the pluralistic society we were, and will be, without the corrosive divisiveness of terrorism. This is the real picture of human rights in Sri Lanka. We are happy to receive and respond to criticism, but we do expect proper engagement and an attempt to understand the full picture. There is enormous promise for Sri Lanka over the decade ahead and we know that all Sri Lankans must benefit from sustained peace in our country after nearly three decades of terrorist threat. Organisations that seek to stoke division and not engage will not help us meet this goal.

Sri Lankan capital tense

SHANE MCLEOD: First to Sri Lanka, where heavily armed troops have surrounded the hotel occupied by the country's main presidential challenger, former army chief Sarath Fonseka. It follows the Government's claim that the former chief of the army could not be named president even if he wins the country's election because he is not registered as a voter. Our correspondent, Sally Sara is at the hotel.

SALLY SARA: This situation at the Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel in Colombo has been developing throughout the morning, local time. There were reports early this morning that troops were stationed outside the hotel. We arrived to find part of the road blocked outside the hotel, troops and trucks and buses across the road. We were able to enter the hotel freely but not film outside. It was quite a strange situation. So many troops outside and yet tourists walking freely inside the hotel. So it was initially quite confusing as to what was going on.

SHANE MCLEOD: Has the Government said anything about why the troops are there?

SALLY SARA: The military commanders at the scene I spoke with said they've stationed troops outside the hotel because they believe that up to 50 military deserters were accompanying General Fonseka inside the hotel and were armed. General Fonseka's supporters say that that's not the case, that he had around 10 soldiers assigned to him for election duty by the Government and the Opposition officials were talking about being willing to bring them out to show them to the military, that there weren't others inside the hotel. Opposition officials believe that the Government's response has been very heavy-handed and they're obviously now concerned about the security and the freedom of movement for General Fonseka, who is still inside the hotel and not going outside. Some members of the media even offered that if the General wanted to go out, why not do that with journalists there to see what would happen. That offer was politely declined. So, there is a lot more tension this morning and it's unclear how this will all play out now.

SHANE MCLEOD: Sarath Fonseka, he's the former army chief, he's very prominent for the role he played in the civil war. Does this point to there being some problems within the military about this election?

SALLY SARA: It's hard to tell. Both sides believe that they will have the cooperation of the military, but also that the military will behave in a professional manner and not be partisan. General Fonseka was saying a few days before the election that he believed he had won most of the postal votes from soldiers deployed around the country. But the Government was obviously able to utilise the soldiers this morning for this particular mission. So the situation is still very tense. Opposition officials are now trying to work out whether General Fonseka will stay inside his hotel, or whether they will attempt to move him to another location in the city.

SHANE MCLEOD: Is this a bit of a show of strength then from President Rajapaksa, is he just trying to show that he is still in control. I gather the results are even showing

that he has a very strong lead. SALLY SARA: The initial results are showing that he has won up to 60 per cent of the votes that have come in. Look, it's hard to tell. It was really hot and cold, the environment this morning. Outside the commanders were saying, we were not film outside until this situation was clear and they were concerned about armed deserters inside. Well inside the hotel lobby, there was a wedding reception unfolding, tourists sitting, eating pastries in the foyer of the hotel. So, high security outside and almost business as usual inside the hotel.

Issue of Lankan fishermen entering Indian waters taken up: Coast guard

Chennai: The central government has taken up with Sri Lanka the issue of illegal fishing by Lankan fishermen in Indian waters, a top Indian coast guard official said today.

The number of Lankan boats being seized in Indian waters has gone up compared to 2008 with 116 boats "apprehended" last year, Rajasekhar, IG, Commander, eastern region coast guard, said. "The Coast Guard has taken up the matter with the Centre which has in turn taken it up with Sri Lankan government," he told reporters here. Rajasekhar said the Sri Lankan fishermen ventured into Indian waters, especially off Chennai, for catching tuna fish. "We are a bit concerned over this," he said. Asked whether they posed a security threat and were 'vulnerable' to be used by anti-national elements, he said, "we have checked that up and there has been no problem... (but) yes, they can be vulnerable and that cannot be ruled out completely but as of now we don't have a problem." To address 'force-level requirements', especially post 26/11 Mumbai attacks, he said 40 ships, 20 boats and 42 aircraft have been sanctioned for the coast guard.

Sri Lanka Election Commissioner urges the public to vote early

Jan 25, Colombo: Sri Lanka Election Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake urged the voters to cast their ballots early morning tomorrow peacefully without involving in violence or destruction of properties. The Election Secretariat has completed the election official selection process and the selected officials are receiving training now on election duties, the Commissioner said. Dissanayake said about 80.4 percent voters possess National Identity Cards while others have been advised to obtain temporary Identity Cards from the Grama Niladaries. Identity cards issued by Justices of Peace are not valid, he said. Over 90 percent have a valid ID document to exercise their vote, he added. The voters who do not have an ID can ask for their ballot papers after examining the electoral register with the assistance of the polling agents, the Commissioner instructed. The Commissioner said no other people are allowed to enter an area of 500 square meter radius around the polling station except the eligible voters, staff, representatives, and security personnel

Israel exploits Haiti for propaganda ...and Sri Lanka?

Ethan Bronner in the New York Times took note Jan. 21 of the controversy surrounding Israel's high-profile rescue mission to Haiti in a story entitled "For Israelis, Mixed Feelings on Aid Effort." But the statements quoted are pretty tame compared to much of what is buzzing around the blogosphere. There is certainly something fundamentally perverse about the Israeli Defense Forces establishing a field hospital in Port-au-Prince as their blockade of the Gaza Strip is actively *creating* an ongoing humanitarian crisis. Commentators within Israel have made the point repeatedly. "Israel's compassion in Haiti can't hide our ugly face in Gaza," wrote **Akiva Eldar** in Haaretz Jan. 18. **Paul Woodward** on the War in Context website Jan. 23 notes a piece in the Israeli daily Maariv entitled "The painful truth: Haiti's disaster is good for the Jews." Blogger Richard

Silverstein Jan. 19 noted a piece in Israel's Yediot by **Yoel Donchin**, a doctor who is himself a veteran of Israeli international disaster response teams—who accuses Israel of "Public Relations instead of saving lives." Donchin actually blasts the IDF field hospital as a scam, saying that "sending portable toilets to Haiti would have been a better option, but this does not provide good photo opportunities." Twenty-two-year-old Emanuel Buso, who was extracted alive by an IDF rescue team after 11 days under rubble, can presumably be forgiven for loaning inadvertent assistance to Zionist propaganda. (YNet, Jan. 23) Unless the story is a creation planted in the media by Mossad, as the paranoid will undoubtedly tell us. But more to the point: Whether or not Port-au-Prince needs porto-sans, it is certainly a bit of a stretch to argue that it *doesn't* need field hospitals. Oxfam is busy digging latrines (BBC News, Jan. 22), and we haven't heard that they have dissed those operating field hospitals. A little time on Google News will reveal that Spain, Norway and Canada (as well as Doctors Without Borders) have also established field hospitals in Port-au-Prince. No such accusations are being made against them, that we are aware of. Now admittedly, Spain's treatment of the Basques, Norway's treatment of the Sami, and Canada's treatment of its First Nations don't come close (in recent years, anyway) to Israel's instrumented humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. But Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defense boasts in a Jan. 24 press release that it has a 1,000-strong contingent in MINUSTAH, the UN "peacekeeping" force in Haiti, which is involved in "the clearing of debris, the carrying out of rescue operations and the provision of medical assistance to the earthquake victims." The statement also said Sri Lanka is donating 1,000 kilograms of tea for the relief effort. This has met with no hand-wringing within Sri Lanka, nor accusations of propagandistic exploitation from without. Yet in Sri Lanka's military campaign against Tamil rebels last year, an intentional humanitarian disaster was instrumented no less severe than that in Gaza. This persisted for months, until the besieged Tamil north of the island was finally overrun—because (in vivid contrast to the Gaza case) there was *no* international protest.

So, while we wish to cut Israel's propagandists no slack, we do wonder: Why the double standard

Sri Lanka's defeated presidential candidate in hiding

Sri Lanka's defeated presidential candidate who failed in a bid to unseat incumbent Mahinda Rajapakse was in hiding Thursday in Colombo after warning of possible attempts on his life

Sri Lankan president wins second term

SRI LANKA'S President Mahinda Rajapakse has been re-elected after a bitterly fought election, state television has reported, as troops surrounded the hotel of his main rival, former general Sarath Fonseka, who has appealed for foreign protection.

"It is a resounding victory for the president," the state-run Rupavahini channel announced yesterday even though formal results from the Election Commission were awaited.

Mr Rajapakse's spokesman Chandrapala Liyanage said the president had won his second term polling 1.8 million votes more than his nearest rival and former army chief out of more than 9.84 million ballots cast. In response, the opposition condemned what it called the military's "unfathomable" intimidation of its candidate. Mr Fonseka's spokesman Mano Ganeshan said they would appeal for outside protection. "I am going to meet a diplomat of a neighbouring country to seek assurances of the safety of Sarath Fonseka," Mr Ganeshan said in an apparent reference to neighbouring India, which has been closely

watching the elections in the island republic it considers as part of its security and strategic ambit. The government had earlier accused Mr Fonseka of employing a private militia consisting of army deserters, a charge he denied. However tension spread across the capital Colombo after some 100 heavily armed soldiers were deployed outside Mr Fonseka's hotel once state television announced Mr Rajapakse's victory. This followed information that these army deserters were among some 400 people gathered inside. Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara said, however, that the deployment was a "protective measure" for those inside the hotel. The campaign's vitriolic nature, the personal animosity between the two rivals and accusations of hatching conspiracies and coups had triggered concern that any outcome of the elections would be contested and could foment unrest. The president's party accuses Mr Fonseka of courting Tamil separatists while he, in turn, charged Mr Rajapakse with vote-rigging and violence. Both men denied the allegations. The presidential contest was a straight race between Mr Rajapakse and Mr Fonseka who together had defeated the 30-year long Tamil insurgency last May which had claimed more than 80,000 lives, wrecked the economy and had cast a constant pall of fear over the island. However, the two fell out after Mr Fonseka claimed to have been sidelined and he opted to challenge his boss on an anti-corruption platform. The election had been brought forward by two years by Mr Rajapakse, keen to capitalise on his success in ending the deleterious civil war. Both candidates had promised voters costly subsidies and public-sector pay rises but economists said this would be difficult to enforce under the terms of a \$2.6 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund.

Four explosions rock Sri Lanka's Jaffna peninsula

Four explosions rocked Sri Lanka's Jaffna peninsula early on Tuesday morning. At least two bombs went off outside the home of a ruling party activist in the Jaffna peninsula, but there were no reports of casualties, the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) said. "We have a complaint that two bombs were thrown at the home of Subramaniam Sharma, an organizer for the (ruling) Sri Lanka Freedom Party, early this morning," spokesman D. M. Dissanayake said. No further information has been provided about the incidents. Security has been on high alert in Sri Lanka for the upcoming presidential election. Election fever has gripped Sri Lanka as 14 million registered voters are eligible to vote in the polls on Tuesday, January 26. The two main candidates — former army commander General Sarath Fonseka and President Mahinda Rajapaksa — will be competing in the first national election since the government declared victory in the war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May. There are 20 other candidates, but none are viewed as serious contenders. Rajapaksa's campaign denies allegations that they are planning voter fraud, saying they will not need to do so to secure a victory.

Results are expected to be announced on Wednesday, January 27.

Sri Lanka President Wins Re-Election - Official Result COLOMBO (AFP)--Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapakse was set for re-election Wednesday after an official count showed he had secured more than 50% of total votes cast in a bitterly fought race. With nearly 85% of the 9.84 million ballots counted, official results released by the Elections Commissioner gave Rajapakse 4.99 million votes against 3.39 million for his main challenger, former army chief Sarath Fonseka.

NEPAL

Nepal ramps up airport security

KATHMANDU — Nepal put security at its lone international airport Saturday on high alert after neighbouring India increased security at its domestic terminals.

"We have put security (at Tribhuvan International Airport) on high alert with a view to possible hijack attempts," said Keshav Raj Khanal, Director General of the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal. India stepped up security at its airports and warned the country's airlines about a possible hijack attempt following a tip-off from Western intelligence services, officials said Friday. The alert received by India said flights of state-run Air India and private carriers could be targeted by Islamist groups aligned to Al-Qaeda or the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) militant group. The alert warned of flights from India or originating in countries neighbouring India -- Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar or Sri Lanka -- being specific targets. "We will deploy more security forces and beef up our vigilance at the Tribhuvan airport," Khanal told AFP. Tribhuvan is the only international airport in the Himalayan nation. Home ministry official Ekmani Nepal called the move a precautionary step. "The Nepal government has increased security so that there will be no incidents on Nepalese soil," he told AFP. On Christmas Eve in 1999, Islamic rebels seized an Indian Airlines plane travelling from Nepal to New Delhi and forced it to land in the then-Taliban stronghold of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. One passenger was stabbed to death by the hijackers before New Delhi agreed to release four Islamic militants in exchange for the 167 passengers and crew. India has been battling an Islamic insurgency in its Muslim-majority region of Kashmir for the past 20 years. Prominent rebel groups fighting Indian troops in the disputed region include the LeT and the Jaish-e-Mohammed, founded by one of the militants freed in return for the Indian plane hostages.

Nepal's residents face 11-hour daily electricity cuts, likely to increase

KATHMANDU, Nepal — Nepal's state-owned utility company announced it will cut electricity for 11 hours a day beginning Thursday because of low water levels in reservoirs that drive hydroelectric plants. Sher Singh Bhat of the state-run Nepal Electricity Authority said the blackouts are likely to lengthen in the coming months. During the spring and summer months last year, the power cuts reached 16 hours a day. Water levels are low in reservoirs used to store runoff during the monsoon season and in rivers that feed them, forcing reductions in power generation from hydroelectric plants, Bhat said. Nepal imports some electricity from neighbouring India but not enough to meet the shortage. A decade-long communist insurgency hampered development projects, including the construction of new power plants. Although the rebels joined a peace process in 2006 and gave up their armed revolt, political instability has continued. Nepali Congress President Girija Prasad Koirala on Thursday congratulated Mahinda Rajapaksa on his victory in the presidential election of Sri Lanka for the second time.

In a congratulatory message sent to the President Rajapaksa, the five-time prime minister of Nepal also wished him a successful tenure. "Your victory to the post of President is the result of your vital role to the establishment of peace, ending longtime armed conflict in Sri Lanka," NC President Koirala stated in the congratulatory message. NC is the second largest party in the 601-member Constituent Assembly. Koirala expressed confidence that the peace and human rights would be institutionalized in the Island nation and age-old

relations between Nepal and Sri Lanka would gain further heights during Rajapaksa's second terms of office.

Maoists need to give up 'extreme' thinking: Nepal PM

Even as he is confident that the new Nepalese Constitution would be ready by the targeted date of May 28, Premier Madhav Kumar Nepal has said if the process is not completed in due time, the entire blame will lie on Maoists who need to give up their "extreme" thinking. Mr. Nepal also said the integration of former Maoists in the army was the most delicate part of the peace process as it was essential to ensure neutrality of the armed forces. "There are four-and-a-half months left (for Constitution drafting). I have been a member of the Constitution drafting committee in 1990 when Constitution was drafted in three months. If it was possible then, why not in 2010," the Prime Minister told *PTI* in an interview here. He, however, noted that "time is very short" and instead of spending time on talks, there was need to move forward practically. "Maoists are aware of complications. They have to take into consideration that it is they who raised the issue of Constituent Assembly elections and drafting of Constitution." "If it is not done in due time, then the whole blame will be on Maoists," Mr. Nepal said adding, "That is why they will have to cooperate. They will have to give up extreme Left thinking." He said Maoists will have to "transform themselves so that people can believe that they are civil political party which has no private army, that they are democratic party observing democratic norms and values. Without that they cannot win the trust of people." "Maoists must be sensitive to the timeliness and attitude of people," the Nepalese Prime Minister emphasised. "If they talk of rebellion, capture of power or single-party monopoly, then people will think they still believe in authoritarianism. If they believe in authoritarianism and create chaos, then they will not be trusted by anyone," Mr. Nepal said. According to the peace agreement between the mainstream parties and Maoists, the new Constitution has to be promulgated by May 28. However, there is a provision for six-month extension which will have to be approved by the Parliament. There are still two issues unresolved -- governance and federalism, Nepal said, adding if these are settled, the Constitution can be finalised. "I am hopeful and positive, it can be done." Describing integration of former Maoists in the army as the "most delicate part", he said, "problems may come up (in this process)." Mr. Nepal said the government was keen to ensure that army remains neutral and professional and there is no interference. "The character of the army cannot be changed... So those wanting to be integrated will have to declare that they have no more affiliations with anyone.... Those (Maoists) should declare that they will not change the character of the army," Mr. Nepal said. On paper, there are 19000 former Maoist combatants confined to camps under UN supervision and arms are still there and yet to be destroyed or submitted. Nepal said he made some proposals for management of combatants. These are -- those willing to join politics will have to leave camps, those wanting to be rehabilitated have options of studies, training, credit, self-employment and shops inside and outside the country. There would be three requirements for those willing to integrate with security organisations -- the number of those to be integrated, whether all those willing to be integrated fulfil the criteria and thirdly who gets priority -- women, dalits or madhesi -- "so that the army is seen as inclusive institution where all have participation", he said. "This needs to be decided by parties before selection." To accomplish the task of management of combatants, the mandate of UNMIN has been extended till May 15, 2010, Mr. Nepal said. Disagreeing with UN Secretary General Ban

Ki-moon's assessment that the peace process was on the brink of collapse, Mr. Nepal said, "It is not at point of break... We should not come to conclusion that the peace process is at break or collapse."

He said the peace process might have seen ups and downs and "We might face difficulties and obstacles but this has been the case earlier also." "People here are responsible, parties are responsible. We have experience of dealing with ups and downs," he said.

Nepal denies media reports of deploying sky marshals

Kathmandu: Nepal on Wednesday denied deploying sky marshals on the planes to and from its only international airport here, amid reports of plain clothed security personnel onboard aircraft in the wake of a hijack alert by India. "India has not exerted pressure on Nepal government and we have not received any formal request for that (deploying sky marshals on Indian planes)," Chiranjivi Nepal, advisor to Deputy Prime Minister Sujata Koirala, said. However, security has been beefed up at the Tribhuvan International Airport, he said. Army and police have been mobilised to secure the airport after India issued warnings last week that militants linked with Lashkar-e-Taiba and al-Qaeda may attempt hijacking an Indian plane bound to and coming from other South Asian cities. Leading newspapers in Nepal, including Kantipur and Rajdhani, today published reports that India is pressuring to allow sky marshal in Air India's flights to and from Kathmandu and security personnel have already been deployed inside the aircraft. Quoting sources in the security establishment, Kantipur reported armed plain clothed security personnel have been deployed in the flights between Nepal and India who board the aircraft as passengers by producing air tickets. High level security arrangement at the airport include stringent measures like making the passengers and baggage go through x-ray machines and physical frisking by security personnel. Sniffer dogs will be used to check passengers at the airport for the first time, Home Ministry sources said. Kathmandu, January 28, 2010

The threat by Nepal's Maoists to stop work by an Indian firm-led consortium on the 300 MW Upper Karnali hydro-power project has evoked criticism from several quarters. Locals, political parties and the business community have condemned the main opposition party, Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), for asking GMR-ITD Consortium to stop work on the project by Sunday on the ground that it was not in "Nepal's favour". "When the Maoists were in power they kept mum, and now that they are in opposition, they are protesting," said Dambar G.C., a senior leader of the ruling Nepali Congress. The threat is part of UCPN (M) strategy of targeting India. In recent weeks, Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' has demanded return of India-occupied Nepali soil and relook at all treaties between the two neighbours. Reports say locals in the area bordering Surkhet, Accham and Dailekh districts (where the project is located) have asked the Maoists to take back the threat as it would affect the region's development. The project that is expected to be completed in 2016. It would supply 12 per cent of the total power free of cost to Nepal

WFP receives donations to support 1.2m people in Nepal

UN World Food Programme (WFP) on Friday said, it has received donations totaling US\$14 million that will enable more than 1.2 million people in Nepal to receive vital food supplies for the next three months. The two timely donations - US\$8 million from the Department for International Development (DFID) of UK and US\$6 million from the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund - mean that more than 600,000 people

who lost rations in December will now receive them again. A statement issued by the WFP quoted Douglas Alexander, International Development Secretary of the WFP, saying, "I'm pleased to be able to announce today that the United Kingdom is providing \$8 million for the World Food Programme in Nepal, to help feed 450,000 people for three months." He further added, "More than ever, these programmes are urgently needed – because nearly two years on from the peak prices of the food crisis, we know that as many as a billion people across the world today are in the grip of a hunger crisis." "The timing of the contributions couldn't have been better with so many people in need of critical food assistance," said Richard Ragan, WFP Country Director Nepal. "These generous donations will help ensure WFP can resume providing rations to most targeted beneficiaries over the coming months." In December, WFP was forced to cut by half its number of beneficiaries from 1.2 million to 600,000 people due to a funding shortfall. Beneficiaries usually receive food and/or cash in exchange for work on vital food security projects, such as micro-hydro projects, trail construction, and building irrigation systems and small-scale plantations and nurseries. The US\$6 million CERF allocation, announced last month, is one of the largest grants ever awarded to WFP. It will provide 4,300 metric tons of food to more than 600,000 people suffering from severe food insecurity through WFP's food-for-work programme. The two donations, along with existing resources, will ensure 1.2 million people will receive assistance through to April. However, WFP's full caseload in Nepal - based on need - should be 1.6 million people. WFP still needs to urgently raise an additional US\$45.6 million for food programmes through to December 2010. It is the first time since the start of this project in 2007 that WFP is facing this degree of funding crisis.

Costs of Nepal bandas

Organizing strikes (popularly known as bandas) have been the easiest way to either show discontent over government policies or to press for one that serves the interest of a certain group. The people dislike bandas because it never serves their interest. It costs them their freedom, vocation and income. Frustrated by the disruption of normal life, youths have initiated a campaign DIE Nepal Bandh DIE. Even Mother's Groups in various cities have protested against bandas. It has been a cancer to the industrial sector, whose contribution to the GDP has nosedived in recent years. A World Food Programme survey conducted last year in Tarai showed that 93 percent of food traders identified bandas as a major constraint to do business. Almost 14 percent of traders were forced to close down their businesses. According to Enterprise Survey 2009, 62 percent of enterprises think instability is the biggest constraint. What are the costs of bandas to the country and importantly to the public? By looking at the cost incurred by each sector if it is shut down for a day, I did a quick back-of-the-envelope calculation. The numbers are startling: On an average, one day banda would cost Rs 1.96 billion, which is around 88 percent of the total value of goods and services produced in the country in a day. The industrial sector alone would suffer over Rs 346 million per banda day. Yes, you read it right. The country bleeds enormous amount in lost production and revenue. The economy is divided into three major sectors: Agriculture, industry and service. The agriculture sector consists of two sub-sectors: Agriculture and forestry, and fishery. The industrial sector consists of mining and quarrying; manufacturing; electricity, gas and water; and construction sub-sectors. The service sector is composed of nine sub-sectors: Wholesale and retail trade; hotels and restaurants; transport, storage and communications; financial intermediation;

real estate, renting and business; public administration and defense; education; health and social work; and other community, social and personal services. Each sub-sector's contribution to GDP is different. Depending on the level of market integration, bandas impact these sub-sectors either fully or partially.

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Costs of banda (Rs)

Per day (in billions)	1.96
Per hour (in millions)	82
Per day (% of GDP per day)	88
Per capita per day	69
Per capita per day (working population)	117

I look at two scenarios to estimate the cost of bandas. In the first scenario, agriculture and forestry; public administration and defense; education; and health and social work sub-sectors are not affected by bandas. In the second scenario, all sectors except 40 percent of agriculture and forestry sub-sector are affected by bandas. This is a reasonable assumption because bandas do not affect market transactions of all agricultural goods. No matter what, people do trade and consume bare minimum goods for survival. The rigidity value, which I define as the responsiveness of agricultural sector to bandas and assume it to be 40 percent, varies depending on the intensity and breadth of bandas. The less responsive the agricultural sector (i.e. the more rigid), the less it is affected. Under the first and second scenarios, the cost would be at least Rs 1.23 billion and Rs 1.96 billion per banda day respectively. The second scenario is most likely when there is a nationwide strike. The first scenario is likely when there is a strike in certain parts of the country. Though these numbers might differ from other estimates with different assumptions, they nevertheless give a fairly good picture of the costs associated with bandas. Based on the second scenario, let me put the costs in perspective. On average, one hour of banda would cost at least Rs 82 million to the economy. In other words, each person in the country would lose Rs 69 per banda day. If we consider the working population only, i.e. 15-64 years, then the cost would be Rs 117 per banda day. Furthermore, if there were a rural employment program that provides jobs and pays Rs 100 per day to people below the poverty line during the lean agriculture season, then one day of banda would have cost over 218,190 rural jobs. The total cost would be even higher if we add indirect costs. For instance, bandas are complemented with destruction of public and private infrastructures, which costs millions to rebuild. Also, a few hours of economic activity are lost before the sub-sectors bounce back to full gear after bandas. Besides affecting the existing as well as future potential of tourism industry, one of the major sources of foreign exchange for the country, it also causes external migration and decline in exports. Rapid decline in exports is one of the reasons for Rs 20 billion balance of payments deficit in the first quarter of this fiscal year. Frequent bandas trigger capital flight, which is detrimental to long-run economic growth. Partly due to bandas, multinational companies like Colgate Palmolive ceased production last year. The garment industry is near extinction. It is also putting upward pressure on general prices of goods

and services, thus contributing to a double-digit inflation rate. It is frustrating to see political leaders, who promised to develop Nepal like Switzerland, encouraging and initiating bandas. They are depriving citizens of the potential for an increase in per capita income, freedom to pursue one's dream and vocation, and to live a peaceful life with a hope for a bright future. Bandas have ripped people off the very things that the organizers promised to bring them. Enough is enough. Say NO to bandas

Glacier melting blunder puts Nepal in a fix

KATHMANDU: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the scientific body dealing with climate change issues, on January 20 pointed to an error in the report while drafting estimates of the rate of recession and mentioning the date for the disappearance of Himalayan glaciers. It is ridiculous that a global hub of more than 2,500 scientists from around the world came to know about the mistake after more than two years of turbulent debates on the issue. The IPCC's fourth assessment report published in 2007 had clearly stated that the Himalayan glaciers were retreating faster than in any other part of the world and at the present rate of retreat they could disappear by 2035. But two full years after much water has flown down the Himalayas, IPCC has admitted that the data taken were baseless and regretted the mistake on glacier melting. Finding some errors in the report may be excused, but acceptance of the mistake after such a long time by a global institution cannot be taken lightly. The admission of mistake came after pressure was exerted by the Indian Environment and Forest Ministry report on glaciers that indicated that glacier melting and global warming could not be linked and clarified that glacier melting is not uniform in the Himalayan region. In the report published about two months before the Indian research team's report, the Chairman of IPCC Rajendra Kumar Pachauri vehemently argued that everything was correct in the IPCC report. But after two months Pachauri has accepted that the statement in the second assessment report on the disappearance of the glaciers was a blunder. The experts here also believe that the date of the disappearance of the glaciers in the Himalayas was not justified by any glaciologist around the world. Yet, in the IPCC report it is documented that most of glaciers would disappear by 2035 due to the rapid melting of the ice on the Himalayas. The IPCC has also been accused of taking glacier melting on the Himalayas lightly. The reports clearly show that the Himalayas are melting at a faster rate and IPCC agrees on the issue too while saying some data are mistakes and that it should have given the correct figure. Keeping the world in dark about glacier melting will adversely affect vulnerable nations like Nepal. Even before the report was published by IPCC and in the initial days after the report was published, world renowned scientists reacted on the disappearance date consistently, but IPCC remained surprisingly nonchalant. It is shocking that such important data were taken from a newspaper interview of one of the glaciologists. It is also a matter of shame for all the scientists who prepared such a document, which was also honoured with Noble Peace Prize for its contribution in drawing the attention of the world towards climate change. The present debate on the climate change is basically centred on the fourth assessment report of IPCC published in 2007, and there are few scientifically proven indicators on the basis of which the debate on climate change is gaining momentum. The sea-level rise, increase of average earth temperature and the melting of the ice on the snow caps are major facts established till date. All these facts and figures are analysed on the basis of these main findings. A vulnerable nation like Nepal is likely to face more controversies on the issues on melting of glaciers as the

efforts to falsify this fact are intense across the world. The IPCC report has very few things included about the Himalayas, and one of the statements included in the report about the glaciers was found to be incorrect after a long time. So what did IPCC do over the years when the issue of glaciers was debated intensely worldwide? Not only the scientists, but the media also reported about the data controversy frequently. The impact of IPCC press statement for Nepal is of immense importance. The main agenda of the nation on the issue of climate change has been the melting of the Himalayas, but indirectly the IPCC admits the glacier data is a mistake, weakening the arguments of a nation like Nepal, which has consistently been lobbying on the issues of the Himalayas and demanding large scale support to combat its impact. Secondly, the reliability of the data generated on the other issues of the Himalayas has come under cloud. The IPCC document has lost its credibility, which can help the climate change skeptics to raise their voice more loudly. Thirdly, the developed world may do a rethink on the funds committed for the least developed countries like Nepal to fight climate change. IPCC about the glacier melt data which had widely spread the message that the Himalayas are alright and there is no need to worry much.

Nepal leaders seek India's help in Constitution writing

Top Nepalese leaders on Wednesday underlined the need for taking the Indo-Nepal ties to a new level, as they sought New Delhi's cooperation in drafting of the Constitution and 'managing' the Maoist combatants. Speaking at a meet on the theme 'Nepal-India Cooperation' here ruling Nepali Congress general secretary Bimalendra Nidhi said, "We have received India's full support and cooperation to move ahead the peace process, democratisation of the country and for moving on the path of economic progress. We expect same cooperation and help to move forward from the current transitional period." The two major challenges Nepal currently faces are managing the Maoist combatants and drafting the constitution, he pointed out and added that Nepal needs India's support to accomplish these tasks. Standing Committee member of CPN-UML, Bharat Mohan Adhikari said, "as peaceful, stable and developed Nepal is also in the interest of India, it is natural for Nepal to expect for India's help for attaining economic prosperity and development." Endorsing Maoist chief Prachanda's view that Nepal and India have a relationship that of Bread and Daughter "Roti Beti Ka Sambandha", Mr. Nidhi said, that the people of the two countries are tied together by common culture, economy, religion and geography. Maoist demand Commenting on the Maoist demand for reviewing the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty, Nidhi said, the current coalition government cannot decide on it. "The present coalition government being a caretaker one cannot decide about reviewing the 1950 treaty, which needs to be decided by a full fledged government that will come after the general election," Nidhi said. Indian Ambassador to Nepal Rakesh Sood said that India's constitution drafted in 1950 is still functioning well even after 60 years and we hope that the constitution Nepal would draft in a few months would also be functional for decades. Sood pointed out that, Bihar which shares border with Nepal has attained 11 per cent growth rate last year. Nepal being the immediate neighbour can also benefit from that, he said. Regarding the 1950 treaty he said, India is ready to review the treaty if Nepal wishes to do so, but Nepal should decide what changes it wants in the treaty. External Affairs Minister S M Krishna during his recent visit to Nepal had told the Nepalese leaders that New Delhi is willing to review the treaty if the Nepalese side wanted. Adhikari said that Nepal needs support from friendly

countries like India as the country is passing through a crucial transitional period. Instead of politicising the issue of border problem and going to the street, problems related to border should be resolved at political and diplomatic level, he said.

Turkey and Nepal to Sign ASA

Turkey and Nepal are poised to sign a bilateral Air Services Agreement (ASA) according to a cabinet meeting held Wednesday. The Turkish government made the proposal saying that air connectivity between the national airlines of Nepal and Turkey would benefit both nations. However, Nagendra Ghimire, Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation secretary, said formalizing the arrangements could take some time. At present, Turkey's national airline, Turkish Airlines, has routes to India, but the addition to Nepal would be a great expansion for the carrier. Currently, no dates or times have been announced, but the government has said the airlines will analyze markets and routes should an agreement be reached between the two. Currently, Kathmandu is not linked directly to Europe. Out of seven European countries, Nepal has so far signed ASA documents with four countries - France, Italy, UK, and Croatia do not utilise their right to have routes into the country. On a global scale, Nepal has ASA with 35 countries in total, of which 10 of these nations do not fly into the country. Currently the Ministry is studying permission requests to fly into the Nepal from two new carriers including Oman Air and Spirit of Manila Airlines.

Huge cache of explosives seized in Bihar, Assam

Nearly two lakh detonators being smuggled to Nepal were seized in Patna while 100 kg of Neogel-90 explosive, a commercial explosive used in Hyderabad and Jaipur blasts in 2007 and 2008, were confiscated in Assam's Lakhimpur district on Wednesday.

Police intercepted a truck carrying the detonators, which were to be smuggled to Nepal through the border at Raxaul in East Champaran district, near Hartali Chowk in Patna on Wednesday night on a tip off, officials said. Invoices from the Rajasthan Explosive and Chemicals Limited consigned for the Synergic Power Development Private Limited in Nepal were seized. Bihar Additional DGP U S Dutta told The Indian Express: "We seized the truck near Chitkohra bridge and arrested driver and the helper, who revealed that one Rakesh, in a Maruti car, was leading their way." Dutta said the police had sent teams to find Rakesh.

Finns urged to lose weight to boost literacy in Nepal

HELSINKI — An anonymous donor is urging Finns to shape up and shed weight to help raise 10 million euros to improve literacy in Nepal, the national health institute said Wednesday. The donor has pledged to grant 15 euros (21 dollars) for every kilogram shed by anyone who takes part in the three-month campaign and weighs in at a participating church before the end of February, the National Institute for Health and Welfare, which is coordinating the campaign, said in a statement. "It's an excellent opportunity for Finns, not only to increase their own well-being, but also to do their bit to help Nepal," the institute's director general Pekka Puska said. The money raised will be used for the schooling of children and the training of teachers in Nepal, with Finland's foreign ministry overseeing the use of the funds.

Japanese grant to Nepal

KATHMANDU, Jan 29: Japan has provided a grant assistance of US\$ 7,298,000 to Nepal for implementation of Clean Energy by Solar Electricity Generation System Project. Tatsuo Mizuno, Japanese ambassador to Nepal and Rameshore Prasad Khanal,

secretary at Ministry of Finance (MoF) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on Friday in this regard. The project is expected to help set up a 300 KW solar electricity generation system for Dhobi Ghat reservoir.

Royalists, India & NC primarily responsible Maoists' rise in Nepal

The Royalists gave birth to the Maoists who were then very cleverly encouraged by India and finally nourished by the Nepali Congress party", said one of the senior Nepali Congress leaders addressing a seminar in Chitwan, January 28, 2010. Khum Bahadur Khadka, the former Home Minister of Nepal also alleged that some of the Nepali Congress leaders (without naming them) are still nourishing the Maoists. Perhaps he was referring to the clandestine nexus between NC's K.P. Sitaula and the upper echelon of the Maoists. "Royal Palace is the mother of Maoists' Party, India encouraged them at a later stage and now Nepali Congress is nourishing them", said Khadka while addressing the seminar organized by Women Cell of the Nepali Congress party. "The present sorry state of the Nepali Congress is due to Girija Prasad Koirala because we took him as a fatherly figure, we made him our Lord and adored him as a Godly figure," Khadka lamented. This perhaps explains the hatred that Khadka has for his own party boss-Girija Prasad Koirala. "If we continue doing so we will be limited in the pages of history", warned Khadka. The Maoists have their strategy as clear as crystal, Khadka said adding, by forwarding the idea of federal division on the basis of caste and ethnicity they want to see Nepal divided into several bits and pieces. "If the Maoists' Strategy to divide Nepal on the basis castes and ethnicity prevail it is certain that our country will see several splits," Khadka continued. "I will commit a suicide if that did not happen finally", Khadka predicted but at the cost of his own precious life.

I did not offer Koirala Nepal PM post: Prachanda clarifies

Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' addressing his party top leaders at a meeting held in Party headquarters Parisdanda of Koteshwor, Kathmandu, clarified that he did not ask Nepali Congress President Girija Prasad Koirala to lead the country as the next prime minister when they met at Koirala residence on Tuesday. "If you are not ready to lead the country then why don't you support me...I need your blessings Girija babu," Prachanda was quoted as saying by the media here on Wednesday. Media reports on Wednesday, January 27, 2010, had claimed that Prachanda asked Koirala to lead the country else support him. Talking to media, Unified Maoists' Party vice chairman Mr. Narayan Kaji Shrestha 'Prakash' confirmed that the party chairman made no such political proposals to Girija babu and that the rumors spread by media were just baseless. The meeting that began on Wednesday is set to continue for few more days which has been summoned to analyze the party's fourth round of protest programs and in all likelihood decide on the next round of protest, say reports. The Maoists' steering committee members will also present their individual views on the political paper submitted by the party chairman. The party meeting on Wednesday lasted for over five hours.

Koirala-Prachanda clandestine nexus is already taking its toll

Major plan to boost Nepal carpet sector

28th January 2010 A task force has been set up by the Nepalese government to set up a strategy to revive the country's carpet industry. Republica reported that the high-level group is set to examine ways in which Nepal's hand-knotted carpet industry can be revived, as it is one of the country's highly-potential exportable commodities. Dan

Bahadur Chaudhary (Kurmi), minister of state for industry, has been appointed as head of the task force, which also consists of representatives from the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the Nepal Carpet Exporters Association and the Central Carpet Industries Association, as well as senior officials from other government ministries. It is thought that a revival of hand-knotted carpet could raise exports income and create employment in Nepal, the newspaper reported. Consumers in Turkey are among the groups keen to purchase hand-knotted carpet from Nepal, according to the Hurriyet Daily News. A carpet store owner commented that the selection of colours and "brightness" of the wools used are what makes the carpets appealing to Turkish customers.

Nepal leads South Asian nations in environment protection

It may be lagging far behind its neighbours like India and China in development, but Nepal has managed to score a lead over other South Asian nations in environment protection according to a latest worldwide survey. The 2010 Environmental Performance Index released on Thursday at Davos has ranked Nepal 38th among 163 countries on 25 performance indicators tracked across 10 policy categories covering both environmental public health and eco-system vitality. Only Japan (20) and Singapore (28) are the other Asian countries that have performed better than the Himalayan nation. Nepal's bigger neighbours India and China have been ranked 123 and 121 respectively in the survey. Other South Asian countries like Bhutan (40), Maldives (49), Sri Lanka (58) Pakistan (125) and Bangladesh (139) have been ranked lower than Nepal in the index that gauge how close countries are to established environmental policy goals. Iceland followed by Switzerland, Costa Rica, Sweden and Norway are the top five countries listed in the index while Togo, Angola, Mauritania, the Central African Republic and Sierra Leone occupy the bottom five positions. The biannual index prepared by a team of environmental experts from Yale University and Columbia University ranks countries on the basis of progress made by them in addressing pollution control and natural resources management challenges.

Nepal to sign air service agreement with Turkey

KATHMANDU, Jan 28: Nepal will have a bilateral Air Services Agreement (ASA) with Turkey, the cabinet meeting on Wednesday decided. The government of Turkey has proposed for the air connectivity a few months ago. "The national airlines can have the air connectivity between Nepal and Turkey now," Nagendra Ghimire, the secretary at the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoTCA), said. "But the air operation may take some time. Turkey's national flag carrier Turkish Airlines flies to India. The proposal does not mention time frame. "If the agreement is inked, the airlines will study market and route," Ghimire said. At present, Kathmandu is not directly connected to Europe. Among seven European countries Nepal had signed ASA with, four countries - France, UK, Italy, Croatia - do not fly to Nepal. Nepal has signed ASA with 35 nations, 10 of which do not fly in. The Ministry is studying the application for permission to fly in Nepal from Spirit of Manila Airlines and Oman

Nepal court summons ex-royals

26.1.2010

KATHMANDU — Three Nepalese princesses have been summoned to appear before a judge in a dispute over their father's estate, in what would be the first court appearance by a former royal, an official said Tuesday. The three women are the daughters of Nepal's

late prince Dhirendra, who was killed in 2001 when his nephew, the crown prince, went on a shooting frenzy at the royal palace in Kathmandu. They inherited his property after his death, but now a woman named Jaya Shah Pandey, who says she married Dhirendra in 1987, is claiming a share of his estate. "The court on Monday ordered three daughters of late former prince Dhirendra to appear before the court to record their statements," said Manoj Shrestha, registrar at the Kathmandu district court. "Disputes arose over the claims made by Jaya Shah Pandey. "Nepal's royal family left their sprawling city-centre palace in 2008 when the then Maoist government abolished the monarchy, ending a 240-year-old ruling dynasty and turning the Himalayan nation into a secular republic. Former king Gyanendra now lives in a hunting lodge outside the capital and was recently ordered to pay his taxes and outstanding utility bills. Dhirendra, Gyanendra's youngest brother, renounced his royal title and privileges in 1988 after separating from his first wife. He never divorced her, but lawyers for Pandey say the pair married in 1987 and that he was able to marry again because the royal family was considered above the law while in power. They say the couple had a daughter, Shreya Shah, who is also entitled to a share of his estate. The three princesses, Puja, Seetashma and Dilasha are the daughters of Dhirendra's first wife, who was killed in a helicopter crash nine years ago. All three now live as commoners in Kathmandu. Reports said they were refusing to part with any of their father's property, but a lawyer for the former princesses declined to comment when contacted by AFP.

MALDIVES

Maldives urges for Indian investment in trade and industry

Chennai, Jan 24 (ANI): Maldives President Mohammed Nasheed has urged the Indian trade and industry to invest in the island nation. On the sidelines of the Partnership Summit 2010, organised by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) here on Saturday, Nasheed said, " I believe that we can build upon a very good relationship especially in trade, as we keep saying more deals is open for business and Indian enterprises already looked into the motives." "We want to see more of it and we think through the partnership forum we able to network and Indian industries can establish and set up in Maldives," he added. Pointing out that Maldives would need an investment of 200 billion dollars in 2010, Nasheed said, "We are expecting investment in energy, transport, infrastructure, housing, education and in health." Nasheed also mentioned that his government would provide tax concessions to companies that would invest in the above-mentioned areas. Union Commerce and Industry Minister Anand Sharma and Deputy Chief Minister MK Stalin also addressed the conference at the summit. Around 1,000 delegates from India and abroad attended the conference, whose main aim was to provide a platform for governments, business and allied services to discuss and address key global issues. (ANI)

Apollo in pact to manage IGMH in Maldives

CHENNAI: Corporate healthcare major Apollo Hospitals has entered into an agreement with the Republic of Maldives to manage the 280-bed Indira

Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH) in Male. To bring the hospital to world-class standards, Apollo is required to invest \$25 million. Apollo is expected to make an assessment of the needs in the first three months. Ortho, cardiac, gastro, nuero and acute care and trauma are the specialities that IGMH would offer in the first phase. In phase II,

Apollo would consider setting up a cancer speciality, that would need a "lot of investment," Apollo Hospitals MD Preetha Reddy told reporters here on Saturday. The nature of agreement, valid for a 20-year term, is such that Apollo would run and manage IGMH. This is the first international public-private partnership arrangement which has ever taken place, she sought to point out. Apollo, which currently has 8,000 beds, plans to touch 15,000 beds. And such a pact stands testimony to global alliances being the way ahead, she said, highlighting the 26 years plus healthcare business that Apollo has been engaged in. Ms Reddy said simultaneously education would be another focus area. With the global demand for nurses surging, Apollo is also keen to set up schools of nursing and medical institution. For the moment, the emphasis would be to understand the infrastructure needs. Maldives president Mohammed Nasheed said the IGMH was "gifted" by the Indian government to Maldives as part of the efforts to strengthen ties between the two countries. Seeing that procedures like tendering process, request for proposals and expression of interest were taking too long, it was decided to cut short the bureaucratic hurdles as the agenda was "delivering affordable healthcare to our people," he said. Mr Nasheed said his government, which has a blueprint for "good health, education and roof over top," intends to diversify into wellness business by setting up such centres and promoting medical tourism. There is a state-funded health insurance too with the government bridging the gap to improve the delivery mechanism. Noting that the government spends a substantial amount in sending its people for overseas treatment, he said annually, 5000 patients from Maldives go to India, Sri Lanka and Bangkok to take care of their medical needs. Mr Nasheed also said the government is signing up a pact with Tata to promote affordable housing. Tata Housing, another Indian realty company and a Thai company would each be given the task of building 1,000 houses (each house measuring 1,200 sq ft) as part of the agenda to provide 10,000 homes by the next year. Under the integrated township model, the monthly mortgage cost of each house works out to \$250. In effect, a person is allowed to invest only 20 per cent of his income on housing and wherever he is unable to, the government would step in and bear the cost, the Maldives president said.

India Inc commits Rs 4,500-cr investment in Maldives

Indian corporate houses have lined up investments worth \$1 billion (around Rs 4,500 crore) in the Maldives, to fructify over the next two to three years. The houses include Tatas, Suzlon, GMR, Apollo Hospitals and Oberoi. "To attract more investment from India, the Maldivian government is planning to ease the procedures for India Inc and planning to offer various incentives," said Ahmed Shaheed, the country's foreign minister. Speaking to Business Standard, the minister, here as part of a delegation led by the Maldives' president, Mohammed Nasheed, said the \$1-billion "is a conservative figure". He said the proposed investments would be in tourism, hospitality, health care, real estate and energy sectors, among others. "We will see to that procedure like tendering process, request for proposals and expression of interest, which were taking too long, will be eased for the Indian corporates. We will also cut short the bureaucratic hurdles," said President Mohammed Nasheed. He added many Indian companies had already invested in Maldives and reaped rich dividends. The Taj Group, with two resorts in Maldives, is one of the pioneers. "The Oberoi group has also initiated discussion with us. We are also keen on promoting mid-end and budget hotels, along with Indian

partners," added Shaheed. To attract more investment into the hospitality sector, he said the government was contemplating various incentive schemes, one of which being to increase the leasing period for allotted property to 50 years from 25 years and reducing the base rent. The government is planning to ink an agreement with the Tata Group to promote affordable housing. It, another Indian realty company and a Thai company would each be given the task of building 1,000 houses (each house measuring 1,200 sq ft) as part of an official agenda to provide 10,000 homes by the next year, in a government-funded scheme. The other potential area to attract investment is renewable energy. Recently, Suzlon signed an agreement with the government for setting up a 25-Mw wind energy farm in the southern Maldives. The GMR group has signed a pact to develop an international port in northern parts of the country. The proposed investment is \$270 million (Rs 1,245 crore). More India business stories On healthcare, the government has signed an agreement with Apollo Hospitals to manage the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital at Maldives. The hospital will be renovated with an investment of \$25 million (around Rs 115 crore).

Apollo, Maldives govt in tie-up to upgrade Indira Gandhi hospital

Healthcare major Apollo Hospitals has signed a public-private partnership (PPP) agreement with Maldives government for the upgradation of the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital at Male, in the Republic of Maldives. Under the \$25-million agreement, Apollo Group would work to upgrade general speciality to super speciality hospital by setting up cardiology, orthopedic, neuro and acute trauma units in the first phase. In the second phase, Apollo would set up a cancer facility at the hospital. Mohamed Nasheed, President of Maldives, said every year close to 5,000 people from his country travel abroad for proper treatment. Following the upgradation procedure, those patients could be served domestically, he added. Besides, the Maldives government is also to sign an agreement with Tata group for developing housing projects in the country. Preetha Reddy, managing director, Apollo Hospitals Group, said, "As a high-end tourist locale, I would say that, Maldives is well positioned for global medical value travel. We are confident that it would be an important step towards broadening the economic base of the country."

Maldives' poll panel wants to learn from Indian counterpart

New Delhi, Jan 25 (IANS) The Maldives' newly-independent Elections Commission wants to learn "a lot" from its Indian counterpart, one of its commissioners said Monday. "We are the first ever independent election commission in the history of Maldives. We are only two months old," Ibrahim Waheed, one of the five election commissioners, told IANS on the sidelines of the diamond jubilee celebrations of the Election Commission of India (ECI). "India is world's biggest democracy. India has voting practice of last 60 years, which is a record in the region. We want to learn a lot from India," he said. The island nation's parliament appointed the first independent election commission in November 2009, changing a long time practice where the poll panel members had been nominated by the president. Multi-party, multi-candidate elections were held in Maldives October 2008 putting an end to 30-year presidential rule by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Recalling the Maldives historic ties with India, he said: "India is always there to support us." "India and Maldives have very very special relations," said Ali Mohamed Manik, another of the election commissioners. Waheed said some people in Maldives still believe that election commission is under the government, adding "we will have to

change such thoughts”.He said their views would be presented at the international symposium “Sharing the Best Electoral Practices”, organised by the ECI as part of its to diamond jubilee functions, here Jan 27 to exchange experience and expertise in election management. Many foreign delegations have requested bilateral meetings with the Election Commission. Chief of Nigeria’s independent National Electoral Commission Maurice Iwu said: “We look forward to work with India’s commission.”Iwu told IANS that the Nigerian poll panel had been in collaboration with Indian Election Commission since 1998.More than 30 heads of electoral bodies from across the world, a majority of them from Commonwealth countries attended the inaugural function of the ECI’s diamond jubilee celebrations, inaugurated by President Pratibha Patil. Vice-President Hamid Ansari, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar, head of missions of various countries and leaders from the entire political spectrum of the country were also present.

Privatisation of Maldives Airport Company reaches key RFP stage

MALDIVES. The Maldives government is preparing to issue a Request for Proposals for a controlling stake in Maldives Airport Company Limited (MACL), which manages Malé International Airport. In October the government launched the process to sell a majority stake in the airport company, to fund the expansion and development of Malé International. MACL will also be restructured so that the privatised company is not responsible for air traffic and security services, as it is currently. The government has employed the services of the International Finance Corporation, which advises on infrastructure projects, to help it find an investor. To date the government has progressed through Expressions of Interest and Request for Qualifications stages, with the formal RFP to shortlisted companies to follow. Turkey’s leading airports group TAV Airports Holding has said it will take part in the RFP, having been among those pre-qualified by the government. In announcing the project the government said: “The Maldives economy is highly tourism dependent; the industry accounts for 28% of GDP and 60% of foreign exchange earnings. Furthermore, over 90% of government tax revenues are derived from import duties and tourism-related taxes. In this context a fully functioning, world-class international airport gains greater salience as the first access point for tourism.” We’ll bring you further news on the shortlisted companies and the RFP as it becomes available.

Maldives - Weekly address: President discusses public sector wages and electricity subsidies

In his weekly address, President Nasheed has said the government can only restore public sector wages to their previous levels after the economy stabilises.He said, “Based on the economic outlook in April, the government may be able to restore salaries to their previous levels.”President said the Maldives had highest wages in the world relative to the expenditure over income. Saying the situation was unsustainable because of the large fiscal deficit accrued, the President said the government had to bring about fiscal adjustments to stabilise the economy.“Despite criticisms and calls for protests by several people, public servants appreciate the value and importance of public sector reforms undertaken by the government“I [therefore] wish to thank all civil servants very much,” the President said.In the weekly address, the President also discussed government’s decision to pay pension levies for government employees.The President said under the

recently passed Pension Act, a seven per cent levy was imposed on employees for their pension fund. That, he said, was a big amount at a time when employees received a reduced salary. To alleviate the burden, the government has decided to pay the levy on their behalf, President Nasheed said. For 2010, government employees must pay Rf 140 million as pension levies. Electricity subsidies In his weekly address, the President also discussed government's policies on electricity subsidies. Government has decided to subsidise electricity bills of 14250 electric metres out of the total 18905 meters in Male. Out of the 14250 metres, The National Social Protection Agency (NSPA) will cover the total increased amount for 10342 metres based on the average bill amounts for five months, while 60 per cent will be paid for 3908 meters. Former President Gayoom. President Nasheed concluded his weekly address by sending well wishes to former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom after his decision to retire from politics. President also discussed in detail the political history of how several Maldivian rulers acquired power and how their power ended.

Maldives - Government welcomes the IMF statement on the implementation of fiscal adjustment measures in the Maldives

The Maldivian government welcomes the statement issued by Mr. Rodrigo Cuberto, mission Chief for the Maldives of the International Monetary Fund on the implementation of fiscal adjustment measures. The IMF statement clearly reaffirms support for the government's economic policy; in particular the plans to reduce spending on public sector wages and in implementing budget restrictions and control. The new administration inherited unprecedented levels of debt from the previous regime. In order to ensure economic stability and long term prosperity, it is essential that the government breaks away from the reckless policies of the past, reduces spending and brings the budget deficit under control. The IMF statement warns that if expenditure on public sector wages increases, the economic situation in the country will deteriorate, as inflation rises and the money in people's pockets is not worth as much at the market. The IMF also notes that an increase in the government wage bill may jeopardize prospects for international support for the Maldives, threatening economic recovery. The government is determined to ensure long term economic stability and prosperity. Increasing civil servants' salaries will undermine the economic recovery and put the future prosperity of every Maldivian at risk. The Maldives government is fully committed to work consistently with the fiscal framework envisaged in the IMF- supported program. Following the IMF statement, President Nasheed urged "all parties to work together to ensure that decisions are made with the best interests of the economy and the Maldivian people in mind."

Maldives - President appoints State Ministers for provinces

President Mohamed Nasheed has today appointed the Ministers of State for Home Affairs in provinces as Ministers of State for their designated provinces. President Nasheed presented their Letters of Appointment at a ceremony held at the President's Office this afternoon.

Ministers of State appointed for provinces are as follows.

1. Minister of State, Upper North Province Mohamed Hunaif
2. Minister of State, North Central Province Mohamed Naeem
3. Minister of State, Central Province, Farooq Mohamed Hassan
4. Minister of State, South Central Province Ahmed Mujthaba
5. Minister of State, Upper South Province Umar Jamal
6. Minister of State, South Province Mohamed Naseer

Speaking after presenting Letters of Appointment, President Nasheed said the government wanted to carry out the decentralization process within a legal framework. However, he noted that the absence of legislation was not a reason to prevent people from fully enjoying the rights prescribed in the Constitution. Furthermore, he urged the State Ministers to discharge their duties with the best interest of the people in mind.

UM students attend climate conference

by Carmen George | January 26, 2010 | *Montana Kaimin*

At the United Nations Climate Conference in Copenhagen last month, University of Montana freshman Zach Brown watched a negotiator from the small island nation of Tuvalu plead for the survival of his country. "His message was, 'If this week doesn't go well, my children may not have a home in fifty years.' And then he started crying," Brown said. "It was a pretty powerful moment." Global warming threatens to turn his country into an Atlantis within the coming years as sea levels rise. The island nation of Maldives faces the same danger. "America is talking about, 'Is (climate change) going to hurt our economy?'" Brown said. "People in the Maldives are talking about, 'Are my children going to be environmental refugees?'" Tuvalu's negotiator remarked that it was ironic that the fate of his country, and the fate of the negotiations, lay in the hands of the U.S. Congress, Brown said. Brown, along with UM students Melissa Hayes and Yaicha Bookhout, witnessed many first-hand accounts like these during negotiations in Copenhagen last month. Tuvalu's negotiator stated that his nation's entire population lives below two meters above sea level. In the Maldives, an estimated 80 percent of their nation could be underwater by 2100 if sea levels continue to rise as expected. Hayes and Bookhout were selected by the Environmental Studies Department to receive funding from the Wiancko Family Foundation to fully fund their travel to the conference in Copenhagen where some 45,000 others flocked Dec. 7 to 18. Brown raised his own funds with the support of the program through UM's Office of the Provost and the Orfaela Foundation. They stayed with local families in Copenhagen. During the visit, the students were allowed to observe many of the negotiation meetings throughout the conference, as well as educational class-like presentations put on by various non-profits.

The meeting of some 192 different nations in Copenhagen seemed especially positive because it created a venue for hundreds of non-profits from around the world to network with each other, said Hayes, a UM graduate law student whose focus is on environmental justice. The conference also increased the global awareness of climate change as a real issue, she said. However, her initial hope and enthusiasm for the conference was soon exchanged with feelings of "tension and pressure" as time went on. The framework for climate change legislation past 2012 was supposed to be decided at the Copenhagen conference because the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. While the conference ended with the Copenhagen Accord, which recognizes climate

change as one of the greatest challenges of the present that needs to be combated, the document is still vague and somewhat disappointing, said the three UM students. Hopefully more concrete, specific resolutions will come out of the next climate change conference in Mexico City at the end of the year, they said. "If the U.S., China and India don't drastically curb their emissions, then what other nations do won't have enough of an impact to make enough of a change," Hayes said. The three hope to take what they've learned in Copenhagen and share it with Montana. They're working on climate change issues and education with various non-profits, UM classes, and university clubs like UM's Climate Action Now. It's important for the youth not to get "bogged down by doomsday scenarios" and to remember to keep pressing leaders to support legislation that helps reduce carbon emissions, Hayes said. Our generation will have to deal with the real affects of these political decisions, she said. Bookhout, a UM senior in Environmental Studies, feels similarly. "Every action has a reaction," Bookhout said, also one of the first UM students who will graduate with a minor in Climate Change Studies. "Everyone makes a difference. Even if they don't care about climate change, their everyday actions are affecting others." Brown, a double major in environmental studies and creative writing, said he didn't realize the full scope of the youth movement working on climate change issues until he arrived in Copenhagen. There are a lot of intelligent, powerful young people who are working to make a difference, he said. Locally, UM students have more access to and ability to influence their elected officials regarding these issues than most other states because of Montana's relatively small population, he said. By pressuring elected officials like Max Baucus to support climate change legislation, students in Montana can help create a global ripple affect nationally and internationally. "The huge youth campaign in Copenhagen was 'How old are you going to be in 2050?'" Brown said. "This is something that's going to impact us, and those people negotiating it now aren't

MALDIVES SHORE UP IN SRI LANKA

Maldives's U-21 cricketers have been in Sri Lanka for two weeks preparing for the biggest challenge of their young lives: the South Asian Games in Bangladesh from January 29 to February 8, where they will be taking on the U-21 cricketers of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Cricket Board of Maldives President Ahmed Hassan Didi who is in Sri Lanka with the team says, "Our target is simple, that is to compete and to do it strongly." Maldives have played five Twenty20 games in Sri Lanka, against top-rated schools winning two and losing three. The 11th South Asian Games has Twenty20 cricket for the first time. It is sure to be the most popular of all the 23 disciplines at the Games. The Maldives U-21s is predominantly made up of the ACC U-19 Challenge Cup squad that played in Chiang Mai in December 2009. On their return home from Chiang Mai, they used a local 50-over tournament for further match-sharpness. They have had five months of Twenty20 cricket in Malé as well.

PDS rice about to be exported to Maldives seized

Chennai, Jan 25 (PTI) About 2,212 tonnes of PDS rice, valued at Rs 3.89 crore, were seized by Customs officials at Tuticorin port today while the consignment was about to be exported to Maldives. A Customs press release said its officers suspected that rice being loaded at the port, meant for export to Maldives was PDS rice and informed state civil supplies department. Customs officials seized the entire load after tests of samples of rice taken from the ship, lorries and rice stocked at the exporter's godown, revealed that

the rice was meant for distribution in PDS, it said. A case has been registered under the provisions of the Customs Act, 1962, the release said

Air Baltic Appoints Cargo Agent For Sri Lanka and the Maldives

MAC Holdings – a member of the EGSAC cargo GSSA network - has been appointed to represent airBaltic Cargo offline in Sri Lanka and the Maldives. This is the first time that the airline has been represented in Sri Lanka, and freight is already beginning to flow on this new route. MAC Holdings is using interline agreements with Kuwait Airways and Jet Airways to connect to the airBaltic's Riga (Latvia) hub.

MAC will initially focus on airBaltic's eastern European and Scandinavian destinations, due to the lower yield on western European traffic. Says MAC Holdings' Manager, Airline GSSA Division, Sunanda Perera: "Our research identified a vacancy for a quality carrier serving this region. Our representation of airBaltic therefore opens up a new export market, with great potential once we have demonstrated the viability of the routing to customers." In the early stages, MAC will concentrate on general air freight and cargo to ensure that connections and transfer handling function correctly throughout. Later, MAC will devote more attention to Sri Lanka's important perishables exports (such as tuna fish, fruit & vegetables and foliage plants), once the necessary additional resources and monitoring have been put in place. Says Mr. Sergejs Galics, Cargo Sales Manager of airBaltic Corporation: "By appointing MAC Holdings as our GSA in Sri Lanka and Maldives, we expect to enhance our presence in South Asia. We are glad to offer our extensive and growing network in Scandinavia, Baltics and CIS countries, to customers in Sri Lanka. We are looking forward to close cooperation with MAC Holdings Private Ltd as a respected GSA, and another member of EGSAC representing airBaltic." In addition to airBaltic, MAC Holdings also represents Shenzhen Airlines (passenger and cargo), Continental Airlines Cargo, bmi and Thai Cargo.

Afghan M.P.'s, insurgent leader's relative, seeking peace talks

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghan parliamentarians held an unannounced meeting last week with a relative of insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar that participants hope can lead to the start of peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, a participant in the meeting said Thursday.

No agreement was reached in the talks in the Maldives Islands on Jan. 23-24, other than to seek the support of the Afghan government, the Taliban and Hekmatyar for negotiations to end the current war, Haji Ubaidullah Achakzai, a member of parliament, told McClatchy. Achakzai said Afghan President Hamid Karzai was aware of the talks as was U.N. envoy Kai Eide. U.N. spokesman Dan McNorton told McClatchy this was the first he'd heard of it. A Karzai spokesman could not be immediately reached. Achakzai, an independent member of parliament from Spin Boldak, south of Kandahar, said the talks would not go forward unless they had support of the parties to the conflict, among them the United States and other countries that have sent troops here to help defend the Karzai government. He said if there are future talks, he expects that three topics will be on the agenda: how to stop the war, how to deal with the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan, and how to remove the names of other Taliban from the U.N. sanctions list which restricts their travel abroad and freezes their bank accounts. But he said there was no discussion of these points during the four sessions held in the Maldives. The U.N. lifted the sanctions on five former Taliban officials early this week. Afghans attending included a number of members of the parliament, tribal elders, Islamic clerical leaders

and Islamic scholars, Achakzai said. The Maldives meeting, first reported by Al Jazeera television, was the third in a series of what Achakzai called the "Conference of Afghans." Achakzai said it was the first one he had attended.

Maldives - Ministry of Education and province offices sign management contracts to transfer some functions of the Ministry to province offices Ministry of Education and seven province offices have signed the management contract to transfer some functions of the ministry to the province offices. As part of the government's decentralization policy, the cabinet decided, on 12 January 2010, to transfer some functions of line ministries to province offices, under a management contract between ministries and seven province offices. At a ceremony held at the President's Office this afternoon, Minister of Education Dr Musthafa Luthfy signed the contract on behalf of the Ministry, while State Ministers appointed to provinces signed on behalf of their respective provinces. Deputy Undersecretary of the President's Office Mr. Hussain Adam who is in charge of North Province signed on behalf of the North Province. Speaking at today's ceremony, President Mohamed Nasheed said the aim of the government was to transfer the functions of all line ministries to province offices to enable the delivery of services directly to the people, under a management contract. In his remarks, the President said a Decentralization Act was needed to establish a solid legal framework to run the administrative regions. He said what the government was doing today was creating a sound administrative structure to deliver services closer to the people.

Maldives - Government to subsidize electricity bills of 14250 electric meters in Male' Government has decided to subsidize electricity bills of 14250 electric meters in Male'.

There are a total of 18905 electric meters in Male'. Under the current framework for giving subsidies, the increment in electricity bills due the recent increase in electricity charges will be paid by the government for a total of 14250 electric meters in Male'. In addition, 60 percent of the increment in electricity bills of 3908 meters will be paid by the National Social Protection Agency. In order to find a permanent solution for the historically higher electricity bills, the government has begun major renewable energy projects in different areas of the Maldives. Government has corporatized the State Electric Company and appointed an independent Board of Directors. As a result, the company had increased the electricity fees to cover the cost of production.

Need for more economic co-operation among ASEAN nations stressed

CII's two-day 16th partnership summit (which was shifted from Hyderabad) began in Chennai on Saturday under the theme, 'Global Partnerships: Meeting Challenges', with participation of delegates from 22 countries. Speakers stressed on the need for establishing close economic co-operation between the countries in Asia and reaching comprehensive economic agreements among them. Summit chairman and Union minister for commerce and industry, Anand Sharma said, "ASEAN is a very vibrant region with an annual trade of more than \$1 trillion. They account for half of world's economic growth. The countries should work on integrating their economies." He asserted the re-energised Doha development round would be concluded this year. If it came through, another \$500 billion would be added to global GDP. Sharma also noted, "Wealth created must be re-distributed. We respect intellectual property rights. But, when we have hunger and poverty, it should not be protected at the cost of human welfare and for the benefit of

few.” He, as well as Maldives president, H E Mohamed Nasheed and Malaysian minister for international trade and industry, Dato’ Mustapa Bin Mohamed, stressed that the multilateral trade accords should be based on rules without allowing MNCs and wealthy nations to dictate terms. Sharma said the global trade regime should reflect the aspirations of people living in developing nations. “There should be rules-based, fair, equitable multilateral trade agreements that reflect the legitimate aspirations of development of poor and vulnerable economies,” he said, and added that the developing countries should re-energise the Doha round and the next round of WTO talks should be dedicated to development. The global organisations such as UN, World Bank and IMF should reflect and represent the world, including countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The minister said that there is a need for more co-operation at the regional level. “Economic integration among regions is very important. America and Europe have done it,” he said, and reiterated that India is trying to strengthen the regional and economic co-operation among regions of South Asia and Asia. He said, India remains as the fastest-growing economy and third- largest destination for investment after China and US. It has attracted close to \$20 billion FDI and an equal flow from FIIs this fiscal. In the last two months, export growth has turned positive reversing the fall in the previous 13 months after the global crisis. Industrial growth has regained a double-digit growth. Investments are pouring into infrastructure. Following the FTA signed last year with ASEAN and South Korea, it is set to sign CECA with Malaysia, Japan, EU, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Gulf co-operation council and others. The speakers highlighted other burning global issues like food and energy security, climate change and stressed the need for developing countries to become leaders in the fields. Sharma said after the global economic crisis, the number of people not having food security touched 1 billion against 850 million year. The summit offered a platform for ministers, officials and delegates from India, Malaysia, Maldives, Tamil Nadu to showcase them as an ideal investment destinations.

Secret 'Taliban talks' in Maldives

It's a controversial idea that some say is the only way to bring peace to Afghanistan . How to convince members of the Taliban to put down their guns, and bring them into the political fold. Al Jazeera has learned that secret talks were held last week on the Maldives Islands between a government official, Afghan MPs and an armed opposition group fighting alongside the Taliban. An ambitious plan is under way to get fighters lay down their arms in return for money and jobs.

Tory adviser masterminded Sri Lankan general's presidential bid

A former Tory adviser who was sacked for making a controversial remark about London’s Caribbean population is one of the masterminds behind the presidential election campaign of the former Sri Lankan army chief Gen Sarath Fonseka.

James McGrath, who has worked for David Cameron, Boris Johnson, the London mayor, and George Osborne, the shadow chancellor, was in Gen Fonseka’s campaign war-room last night compiling reports of intimidation by supporters of President Mahinda Rajapaksa and advising on strategy in the run-up to today’s declaration. If Gen Fonseka does win, much of the credit will go to Mr McGrath, who has played a key role in sharpening the campaign since his arrival last month. In an interview with The Daily Telegraph, he said he did not have any qualms about supporting Gen Fonseka’s

campaign, despite the general facing allegations of war crimes relating to his role in crushing the Tamil insurgency. He said he believed that Gen Fonseka would introduce democratic reforms, respect human rights and improve people's standard of living. Mr McGrath was forced to resign as Boris Johnson's chief political adviser in 2008 after he said London's elderly Caribbeans could leave Britain "if they don't like it here".

His comment was in response to a question on whether a Johnson victory might cause an exodus. Although he became a political liability in Britain, his reputation as an effective campaign strategist was restored when he masterminded the 2008 presidential election victory of the Maldives opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed. His role in the Maldives resulted in the former Sri Lankan prime minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, the leader of the main opposition group, the United National Party, persuading him to join Gen Fonseka's campaign. Mr McGrath helped to draft pledges to abolish the president's executive powers, restore the primacy of the prime minister and speed up the rehousing of Tamils. "The best way to help countries to grow is to say 'let's help you build a democracy'," he said. "I don't have any qualms about backing an army chief. I'm here on behalf of the leader of the opposition. "The United National Party is a proud pluralist party, strong on protecting minorities, sometimes to their political cost." The general's backers last night claimed he had won the election, but campaign insiders said the two main candidates were "neck and neck".

IOM calls for revising SAARC convention on trafficking

Dhaka, Jan 28 (bdnews24.com)—A regional workshop Thursday stressed the need for expanding the scope of definition of trafficked persons in the SAARC convention. The workshop identified that the "SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution" did not include male as trafficked persons. "The participants proposed that the SAARC Convention on Trafficking be revised to make it an effective instrument for combating trafficking in persons in the region," said a press statement issued by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) which organised the workshop at hotel Sonargaon. "The participants agreed that the scope of the convention needs to be expanded to include trafficking of men and trafficking for other exploitative purposes, such as forced labour or labour trafficking," said the statement. Foreign secretary Mohamed Mijarul Quayes attended the workshop as chief guest at the concluding session. The IOM also presented a research paper on trafficking in persons in Bangladesh, Nepal and the Maldives. "The secretary further reiterated his commitment to take forward some of the recommendations identified by the study as well as the meeting, during the preparation for the upcoming 16th SAARC Summit at Thimpu, Bhutan," said the statement. Rabab Fatima, the IOM's regional representative, highlighted the importance of maintaining the momentum generated at this regional meeting. "IOM calls for each of the participating countries to move forward the review process for an effective and timely implementation of the recommendations," said the statement. Participants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan attended the two-day meeting.

Male agrees to work with Dhaka on climate change

The Maldives government has agreed to work with Bangladesh for resolving the global climate change issues

The newly appointed Maldives high commissioner to Bangladesh, Ahmed Sareer, made the remark when he placed his credentials to President Zillur Rahman at the President's

Secretariat in Dhaka recently. Praising the role of Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina in the Copenhagen conference on climate change, Sareer said Hasina successfully motivated the world leaders of rich countries for reducing their carbon emission. "We are committed to continuing our efforts for reducing carbon gas emission successfully

SpiceJet to hire 150, plans for overseas markets

New Delhi, Jan 26 (PTI) The leading low-cost carrier SpiceJet today said it is planning to hire about 140-150 employees to meet the manpower requirements for the four new aircraft it would add this year, besides flying abroad. "We will hire about 100 flight attendants and 40 pilots for the four aircraft we plan to acquire this year," SpiceJet chief executive Sanjay Aggarwal said. The carrier currently has a fleet of 19 Boeing 737s. The low-cost airline also has plans to enter international destinations later this year. "We have applied to the regulatory authorities to fly to Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal and Bangladesh," Aggarwal said. The airline will complete five years of operations in May when it will become eligible to fly abroad. As per present regulations, an airline with less than five years of domestic operations is barred from flying overseas. IFAD hold development programme | International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) begins a programme on Monday to develop agriculture and fishing industry in the Maldives. With 76 participants, Fisheries Agricultural Diversification Programme will continue for four days at STELCO seminar room. In the inaugural ceremony, Dr Ibrahim Didi, minister of fisheries and agriculture said he expect the programme would expand both agriculture and fishing industry. "This programme is aimed for the people who do fishing or agriculture on a smaller scale," he said. "The programme would teach how to generate income and to conduct the work. This programme would mainly benefit women. "The biggest challenge in these industries is finance and expertise. This programme would open new doors." IFAD has invested US\$ 6.8 million for a period of five years commencing on 30 June 2009, to develop agriculture and fishing industry of the Maldives. In 1999, IFAD has also invested US\$ 3.5 million for development projects in the Maldives. _

MP Thasmeen to run as DRP leader

MP Ahmed Thasmeen Ali announced on Wednesday to run in the largest opposition Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party's congress elections as the party leader. His decision comes after a day the present leader, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the former president of the Maldives announced that he would not contest in the party elections giving way to the new generation. Instead, he endorsed Thasmeen as the party leader. Thasmeen is the vice-president of DRP and was the running mate of Gayoom in December 2008 presidential elections. At a press conference at DhiTV studio, Thasmeen said he decided to run as the leader to serve the party adding DRP is a democratic party. But he did not respond when questioned whether he supports to choose a presidential candidate holding a primary election. According to DRP charter, the party leader shall contest in the presidential elections without holding a primary election. Thasmeen said there is time to amend the party charter, refusing to disclose his opinion on the subject. "In every congress, the party charter can be amended," he said. Although, Thasmeen failed to reveal the proposed amendments to be presented on 20 February congress, he said he would propose to recognise Gayoom as the founder. DRP is the largest political party in the Maldives with over 30,000 members. MTDC agrees to pay US\$ 3.5 million to Yacht Tours |

Maldives Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) agrees to settle US\$ 3.5 million (Mrf 50 million) to Yacht Tours to settle the legal dispute outside the court. MTDC chairman Ibrahim Saleem (Bandhu) said the decision was made on Wednesday evening. "Herethere resort can manage well by operating charter flights," he said. "Income cannot be generated with few tourists. The tour operators agree to operate charter flights if there is not legal dispute." "Rather pending the US\$ 55 million worth Herethere resort in the court," said board member Ahmed Shareef. "The company and the shareholders would benefit most if we start the business operation." Herethere resort case had made loss both MTDC and Yacht Tours; said Saleem explaining the US\$ 3.5 million is not an amount paid as compensation. He added US\$ 1 million will be paid as down payment and balance US\$ 2.5 million to be settled in within two years. Dr Mohamed Jameel, Yacht tours legal advisor and former communication minister said "it was the best decision for the moment". "Considering the economic crisis both nationally and worldwide," he continued. "This is the best way for the both parties." MTDC CEO Mohamed Mihad said after resolving the legal dispute, the company would proceed to lease the resort for a different party. "Still there are interested parties," he said. 273-bed Herethere resort was leased to Yacht Tours – a company owned by ex-MP Abdulla Jabir – in May 2008 for US\$ 18,196 per bed annually. MTDC terminated the agreement, when Yacht Tours refused to pay the rent claiming MTDC failed to stick to the agreement.

Psychology at Work: Climate, Copenhagen and Custard Pots

The climate change row shows the importance of clear, straightforward, memorable messages. Swilling out my (low-fat) custard pot the other evening, I found myself pondering the futility of it all. Having got to middle age, without thinking that much about global warming or the environment, I am now having to consider what I am doing far more deliberately. Meanwhile, representatives from over 180 nations were recently gathered together in Copenhagen trying to agree what they are going to do to combat climate change. Their visions of the future were nightmarish, even apocalyptic. The gulf between the looming disaster and the action that each individual can take is enormous, and this gross mismatch is one of the main reasons why people are slow to do anything. In other areas of public policy - wearing seat belts, stopping smoking in public places, driving at lower speeds - there is a direct link between action taken and its impact. We can see, in other words, what's in it for us. With climate change the connections are so much more difficult to make. Recycling custard pots is hardly going to save the Maldives, is it? In the other policy areas mentioned, one of the most significant reasons they have worked is not legal enforcement but peer pressure. If one fails to wear a seatbelt or lights up a in a pub, it's the fact that others will point out your transgressions that will make you change. But with the environment, I don't sense any great peer pressure. I wash my custard pots because I choose to; if I didn't wash them out, no-one would be telling me to do it. Finally, the messages about what we should and shouldn't do are complex and confusing. Simplifying good nutrition into '5 a day' was a real masterstroke of communication. It probably won't be possible to do this with climate change, but more needs to be done by activists, governments and organisations to make the actions we need to take as straightforward and memorable as possible. But there are broader lessons here for organisations trying to bring about changes in behaviour. First, you must be able to have an answer to the question: 'What's in it for me?' People

must see some benefit for themselves. Second, the change needs to be accepted by a critical mass who will also be disapproving of others not making the change. Third, the change must be as simple and easily understood as possible. When these three elements line up, the probability for successful behaviour change will be significantly higher.

Nations must share technology to fight poverty: Anand Sharma

CHENNAI, January 24, 2010 Countries with resources and technology should share them with the deprived nations, especially when they could fight pandemics and poverty, Union Commerce Minister Anand Sharma here said at the Partnership Summit 2010, organised by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), here on Saturday. Mr. Sharma said globalisation had brought a host of challenges with a new wave of opportunities. Economic wealth was essential to create a developed world, but wealth should be redistributed so that none became the victim of the changing world. The recent economic crisis was a painful reminder that the new crises required global responses. But it also showed that the effects were not uniform. Economic regions were becoming more important than national boundaries and it was India's constant endeavour to bring closer more regions of the world. With the world moving towards a multi-polar regime, India believed in larger economic cooperation among the Asian countries and the countries of the South, including Asia, Africa and Latin America, he said. The Minister expressed the hope that the next Doha round of talks would lead to a fair and equitable multilateral regime, which would help to meet the aspirations of the poor and the disadvantaged. But the issues that cropped up during the climate change talks should not slow down the Doha round. Responding to questions later, Mr. Sharma said that despite the slowdown, India remained an attractive destination for investment. The economy was expected to grow significantly in the last quarter and the Foreign Trade Policy helped exports turn positive. The core sector grew by 6 per cent in December, from 0.7 per cent last December. Industrial production also registered a strong growth. Mr. Sharma, who was present at the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the CII and the Malaysia India Business Council, said the talks with Japan and the European Union were in advanced stage. A Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement with Malaysia would be signed soon and the Indo-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement expanded to cover services. Wealth should be redistributed so that none becomes victim of changing world. Despite the economic slowdown, India remained an attractive destination for investment

OEC provided over 131,000 jobs: MD

ISLAMABAD: Overseas Employment Corporation (OEC), an attached department of the Ministry of Labour and Manpower has so far provided over 131,000 jobs in 54 different countries. OEC Managing Director Jahangir Alam Chohan said on Monday that recently Memorandum of Understanding has been signed between the government of Uman and Pakistan. Under the agreement, he said, Pakistan would provide 1,000 medical professionals to Uman in the different phases, while the process has already started. He said that in the first phase the government of Uman conducted the interviews and selection process in Karachi and selected 350 medical professionals. Chohan said 73 persons in current week have been sent to Malaysia and 88 to Libya in the fields of construction including masons, engineers, diploma holders and other skilled

manpower. He said that most of the proposals and demand have come from the Middle East countries because in these areas so many opportunities for Pakistani labourers. The government of Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Libya and Maldives, have sent their requests to Pakistan for the import of medical professionals, while the delegation of ministry of Health Saudi Arabia would soon visit to Pakistan for the selection of the doctors. To a question, Chohan told that recently OEC has received the well performance award from the government of South Korea for exporting skilled labourers from Pakistan. The corporation is mandated to promote employment of professionals, highly skilled, skilled, semi-skilled and un-skilled manpower in foreign countries. Apart from meeting the specific and exacting standards of foreign employers, the corporation also acts as a protector of emigrants to ensure their welfare and to promote harmonious working relationship between the employers and the employees.

BUHTAN

Missing ULFA members killed after Bhutan operations
Tezpur (Assam), Jan 27 (PTI)
Eleven ULFA members, including three top leaders, captured during Operation All Clear in Bhutan in 2003, were killed by security forces, a surrendered member of the group today claimed. Kamal Nath, who is currently in jail for his alleged involvement in the killing of trade union leader Daniel Toppo in 2000, told reporters after being produced in court here that the missing members were taken to Shillong immediately after the operation and eliminated. The ULFA leaders killed, according to Nath, included the group's central committee members Bening Rabha, Ashanta Bagphukan and Robin Neog, whose release their family members have been demanding for long. Senior police and security officials refused to comment on Nath's allegation

Bhutan to export oranges to Bangladesh Bhutan will export oranges and other horticultural products to Bangladesh through India's northeastern states, officials said here Saturday. "The first consignment of oranges would be exported to Sylhet in Bangladesh soon through the Dawki land customs station in Meghalaya," a senior Meghalaya government official said. "New Delhi has recently agreed to a Bhutan government proposal to carry out the export to Bangladesh through the northeastern states." To finalise the modalities and formalities, a delegation from Bhutan comprising a member of the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce, Bhutan export and import association, Indo-Bhutan friendship association and government officials earlier this week had visited the Dawki land customs station. Bhutan has so far been exporting oranges, ginger and various other crops to Bangladesh through West Bengal. Bhutan has been producing on an average 100,000 tonnes of oranges annually. India and Bhutan share a 643-km unfenced border while four northeastern states - Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Assam share a 1,880-km border with Bangladesh. At the end of a three-day visit to India by Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina earlier this month, a joint communique by the two countries had said trucks from Bhutan and Nepal would be allowed to enter about 200 metres into Bangladesh at Banglabandh, a land customs station at Phulbari in West Bengal.

Bangladesh has been pressing India to provide a corridor through West Bengal to conduct trade with Bhutan and Nepal.

Despite Democracy, Christians in Bhutan Remain Underground

THIMPHU, Bhutan (Compass Direct News) – In this distant and isolated nation in the eastern Himalayas, known as the “Land of the Thunder Dragon,” almost everything looks uniformly Buddhist. Most men and women in the landlocked country between India and China wear their national dress, and all the buildings – with their sloping walls, trefoil-shaped windows and pitched roofs – look alike, as if they were Buddhist monasteries. There are no visible signs of Christians’ tiny presence, but they do exist. Christians, whose only official identity falls in the “others” category in the census, are estimated to range in number between 3,000 and 6,000. And they live out their Christian lives underground – no church buildings, Christian cemeteries or Christian bookstores are yet allowed. Of Bhutan’s more than 670,000 people, 75 percent of them practice Buddhism, according to the 2005 census. Around 22 percent are Hindu, mostly of Nepali origin. An absolute monarchy for over 100 years, Bhutan became a democratic, constitutional monarchy in March 2008, as per the wish of the former King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who served from 1972 to 2006. It has been nearly two years since democracy arrived in Druk Yul, as the country is known in its national language, Dzongkha. But little has changed for Christians. If there is anything open about Christianity, it is the acknowledgement of Christians’ presence in the national press, which was born after the advent of democracy.

“A journalist telephoned and asked me if I was converting local people,” said a middle-aged pastor clad in Gho, the men’s national uniform, a knee-length gown woven with colorful wool. “I wondered how she got my phone number. Maybe a Christian friend of mine passed it on.” The pastor requested anonymity – the same request that high government officials made, no matter how trivial the matters they divulged. The pastor said he told the journalist he did not pay people to convert. “People choose to become Christians out of their own free will,” he said. “I am working within the constitution of the country.”

Still a Monarchy: Asked why the church remained underground in spite of a provision for religious freedom in the new constitution, the pastor replied, “Virtually, Bhutan is still a monarchy. The time is yet to come when we have the assurance of protection.”

His wife, wearing the ankle-length woollen skirt or Kira that is the national dress for women, smiled at what was perhaps a naïve question – the power of the monarchy is beyond question. By law all Bhutanese citizens wear the national dress in schools and certain public, government and religious places. Non-compliance can result in fines or imprisonment. Asked what would happen if authorities found out about their underground church, the pastor said that before 2008 they would have been arrested because Christianity was banned. “Even now, there will be serious repercussions,” he said. “What exactly will happen, I do not know. But no Christian worker will take the risk to find it out the hard way. To construct any building, Bhutanese citizens require a licence from the government.

“As far as the governance is concerned, the Royal Government of Bhutan is very caring,” he said. “We get free education and free medicine and hospitalization, and there is a sense of security because the crime rate is very low. But asking for a licence for a church is beyond our imagination as of now

PNB to set up subsidiary in Canada by Dec

KOLKATA: Punjab National Bank (PNB) is setting up a 100% banking subsidiary in

Canada to do business with the Punjabi diaspora and other nonresidents Indians (NRIs) residing there. The process of setting up the subsidiary may be over by December 2010, according to the PNB chief. The bank may start operation with one or two branches in Canada. PNB is, in fact, lining up an overseas expansion plan to enhance its overseas business. "We have to go overseas now as merely 2-3% of our total business comes from abroad. We will first attempt to open offices in countries with a sizeable Punjabi population as they are typically loyal to PNB. We have learnt this from our experience with the UK subsidiary, which is doing very good business," PNB chairman and managing director KR Kamath said here in the city at an interaction with the media. Incidentally, for leading players like Bank of Baroda, Bank of India and State Bank of India, overseas business constitutes a significant part of their business. The Delhi-based bank is also set to launch a bank in Bhutan in January 27. "It will be a joint venture between PNB and Bhutanese promoters and PNB will hold 51% with an investment of Rs 15.5 crore," Mr Kamath said. It is learnt that 19% will be held by the Bhutanese promoters. According to Bhutan's regulation, PNB will need to place the balance 30% stake with public immediately. The company, called Druk PNB Bank, will be Bhutan's first joint venture bank and the third bank in the country. It is understood that the second largest public sector bank after State Bank of India is exploring possibilities to set up base in locations like Dubai International Finance Centre, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Shanghai, Norway and Sydney. Meanwhile, Mr Kamath said he would like to put a thrust on fee-based income, which now constitutes just about 7% of the bank's income. In step with its Vision 2013 document, the bank is chasing a total business of Rs 10 lakh crore by 2013. PNB's total business now stands at over Rs 4 lakh crore.

ADB approve grant for Bhutan

Bhutan is getting support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Japan to counter the harmful impacts of climate change on its rivers.

The Japan Special Fund, financed by the Government of Japan and administered by ADB, is providing a \$700,000 grant for building up the capacity of Bhutan's National Environment Commission (NEC). The grant will boost the ability of NEC to adequately assess and promote hydro power and other renewable energy projects suitable for availing of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) under the Kyoto Protocol, and for potential carbon trading. There is considerable scope for tapping the CDM as Bhutan and India - the main purchaser of Bhutan's electricity exports - are planning more hydro power projects with combined output of about 10,000MW.

The NEC is the designated national authority for climate change issues and handles projects that are eligible to avail of carbon credits under the Kyoto Protocol. However, it currently lacks the staff and other capacity for developing mitigation and adaptation measures that can counter climate change. Bhutan's rivers are the backbone of the economy, with exports of hydro power-generated electricity accounting for more than 40% of national revenue, while 70% of the population lives in rural areas and depends heavily on irrigated agriculture. Climate change threatens to have a serious impact on river flows as a result of changing patterns of rain and snowfall, flash floods exacerbated by melting glaciers, and acute droughts in the dry season. "The technical assistance will help create functioning and sustainable climate change mitigation and adaptation systems for combined energy and water resources in the country," said Kaoru Ogino, Senior

Energy Specialist in ADB's South Asia Department. In spite of vital water resources for Bhutan, no single ministry or government agency is currently in charge of overseeing integrated resource management. The project will help NEC coordinate the differing ministries and agencies involved in the process, ahead of the eventual establishment of a single body. It will also boost NEC's ability to expand Bhutan's access to financing for climate change mitigation and adaptation projects. The assistance will be coordinated with the work of other civil society groups and donors, including Danish International Development Assistance, Japan International Cooperation Agency, and United Nations Development Programme. The Government of Bhutan will provide \$50,000 equivalent for the project, which has a total cost of \$750,000. NEC is the executing agency, with the work to be carried out over 18 months, with an expected completion date of September 2011.

McKinsey projects 70 % rise in health care cost

McKinsey's diagnostic finding on Bhutan's health care system projected a 70 percent increase in health care cost in the next five years if the country's health system standards remained the same. McKinsey explained that global experiences showed improving health services at this stage was more costly because of changing patterns of diseases.

"Bhutan is at the cusp where further improvement in health outcomes requires higher cost," stated the findings. Such findings have caused health ministry officials to consider financing options to sustain its health care system, lauded for the state bearing almost 70 percent of the health expenses. Besides, the Constitution states that "basic" health services be provided "free". Health minister, Lyonpo Zanglay Dukpa said people should be made aware of health care costs. "With McKinsey's expertise, we are looking at ways to make our health system more efficient and cut costs by about 15 per cent so as to continue providing free health care services," he said. World health organisation (WHO) officials pointed out that Bhutan spent four percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on health. About 50 percent of the ministry's recurrent capital was spent on salary and allowances and about 29 percent on medical supplies and office stationeries. Referrals abroad cost about 7.1 percent of the total health expenses every year. Tax, donor aids, Bhutan health trust fund and foreign funded hospitals, like IMTART, continue to be the country's main sources for health revenues. In a presentation on Bhutan's current health financing approach in a global context, World Bank's Dr George Schieber said that non-communicable diseases (NCD), which are expensive to treat, dominate the health care system in Bhutan. "And future aging will affect total health expenditures in Bhutan and most south Asian countries," he said. Dr Schieber said Bhutan had fared better in reducing infant mortality rates and increasing life expectancy compared with other countries within the region. "But given its income and expenses spent on health, its performance is below average," he added. Provisions for private healthcare systems and outsourcing non-clinical services like housekeeping and security were some of the options McKinsey proposed. "I usually recommend the government to increase health care tax if funding is an issue," WHO consultant Dr Soonman Kwon said. Public health director, Dr Ugen Dophu suggested the need to strengthen public health department's role to cut costs. "All the funds DPH gets comes from donors and not the government," he said. "To save costs on treatment, which is expensive, we should focus on prevention." A few experts insisted that Bhutan should focus on improving what it has been doing well in so far rather than starting a new system all together. "Please don't try to fix

something that's not even broken," Dr Soonman said. About 60 participants from world health organisation (WHO), World Bank, McKinsey and Bhutanese health officials have gathered at Paro since yesterday to discuss health-financing options for Bhutan. In the next two days, participants will discuss sharing health costs, feasibility of different private insurance schemes and government subsidy for people unable to finance their own healthcare services.

Options to sustain and improve healthcare

The health ministry could start charging non-Bhutanese for health services and Bhutanese who come to referral hospitals even when not referred as a means to generate more revenue to sustain the health system. These were two recommendations made by experts, to generate revenue without having to do a study, at a meeting in Paro yesterday where health officials explored options for more revenue and improving efficiency of the health system. Selectively introducing private participation, initially in the non-clinical sector and then in the clinical sector, was another alternative suggested. But health officials said this needed caution. "Many countries are trying to get out of the grip of private health care practice because patients have become customers and hospitals, five star hotels," said the health secretary, Dasho (Dr) Gado Tshering. A health official cited the example of China, which opened the market to privatisation overnight. "Studies show that poverty levels increased by 20 percent," he said. Increasing the health tax was another thoroughly discussed option. But finance ministry officials said the one percent health tax paid by government and corporate employees goes to the government not the health ministry. According to the finance ministry Nu 58.2 mn was collected as health contribution in 2008. The government's spending on health shot up from Nu 768 mn in 2000 to Nu 1,792 mn in 2008. An economist from the World Bank, Dr George Schieber, said that revenue enhancement has nothing to do with efficiency. With Bhutan about to cross the threshold of a least developed country (LDC), health officials said that it would be difficult to get donor funds. Which is why the health ministry need to look at options to financially sustain its healthcare services. Other options recommended were the use of information technology (IT), separation of the payer and the provider, starting a co-payment mechanism where those with the ability to pay could pay for health services and starting a paid evening clinic in public hospitals. Starting a paid evening clinic in public hospitals received a lukewarm response. UNICEF representative, Dr Gepke Hingst, said that it would increase disparity. "Equity and GNH may not be there with paid evening clinics," she said. The feasibility of foreign direct investment (FDI) in tertiary healthcare services and wellness tourism was another option discussed. But WHO consultant, Dr Soonman Kwon, said that while wellness tourism may be okay starting a tertiary healthcare would be difficult. "You should have a target and think whether you have the capacity to be competitive because FDI in health sector would mean opening the market," he said. "Please don't over estimate yourself to do well in this very saturated market." The health secretary said that defining the group who shouldn't be paying has been a major problem. Dr Kwon cautioned that in low-income countries, there are lots of "politically poor" people. But the concept of splitting the payer (the finance ministry) and the provider (the health ministry) was however not well understood by the participants as the three-day workshop closed yesterday in Paro. One of the McKinsey experts, Dr Mandar Vaidya, explained that by separation they meant that a body should be formed to monitor and manage healthcare services in the ministry. "Irrespective of the health ministry's revenue

collection methodology, there needs to be an entity in the ministry, which holds itself responsible for healthcare services management,” said Dr Vaidya. Lack of proper planning was also pointed out as one of the reasons for inefficiency. “There is poor utilisation of funds,” said a health official. “Some of us are not able to fully utilise the funds while some have no funds at

Govt. to clamp down on copyright infringement

Rampant copyright infringement or piracy of creative works in Bhutan could come under fire and eventually go underground, with the government on the verge of launching a coordinated enforcement campaign. The government’s intellectual property division (IPD), earlier this month, met with enforcement agencies and the business community, to “streamline enforcement procedures and make aware their specific roles and responsibilities”, said Dorji P, a copyright officer. Despite the existence of a copy right act, piracy in the country is increasing with the local music and film industries bearing the brunt of it, says a fact finding report on the current scenario of intellectual property in Bhutan. The report, compiled for IPD by a local consultant says, “Even though the Copyright Act provides strong provisions the procedural structure of the Bhutanese system has always been a hurdle to deter piracy.” The report says the police should treat copyright infringement as criminal cases, which includes fining and possible imprisonment of offenders to make clear the seriousness of crime. On the current situation it says, “the Police do not act on a complaint (on copyright infringement) on the grounds that it is not within their jurisdiction”. Persons whose copyrights are infringed will be able to lodge a complaint with the police before it can carry out an investigation, says the report. Once in possession of a warrant, police can seize relevant articles and store it for evidence during court procedures, or even destroy them if necessary. The report also states that police personnel, “if satisfied that an offense in respect of the infringement of copyright in any work has been, is being, or is likely to be committed, seize without warrant, all copies of the work, wherever found”. Once a suspect of copyright infringing is arrested, the police can also, search the areas under the suspect’s immediate possession or control, without a warrant. “The judicial system is very slow and burdensome which makes copyright enforcement an even more difficult task,” says the report. Expensive, time consuming, lack of copyright knowledge by judges, and inadequate penalties, are some of shortcomings pointed out. It says that intellectual property (IP) cases cannot face delays as immediate protection for right holders is required. IPD is also currently drafting an enforcement rules and regulations booklet to clarify to relevant agencies their duties when the enforcement campaign is launched some time this year. It will provide enforcement officers with specific instructions on how to handle cases. Customs officers, for instance, if suspicious of a consignment have the power to search and seize pirated goods. The booklet points out that customs officials, if above a certain rank, can also arrest a copyright offender without a warrant. Copyright officer, Dorji P, did not give an exact timeline on when the enforcement campaign to end piracy will commence as IPD is still waiting for police consensus on persecuting copyright infringing as criminal cases. But he emphasised that RBP is “ready to help,” and all issues would be solved within the week. Sherub Gyaltshen, the general secretary of the motion picture association of Bhutan (MPAB), said that although MPAB had been persisting on a clamp down detention and imprisonment may be “too harsh” a penalty.

He said MPAB would be satisfied with just immediate raids and seizure of pirated goods, when called for. On whether local businesses, such as video stores renting pirated copies of Bollywood and Hollywood films, would also be raided as part of the campaign, Dorji P, said that this was one of the issues being worked out with the RBP. "Copyright laws could be a double edged sword that can cut both ways," he said. "The government can't do that," said the owner of a local video rental store, who requested anonymity, on the possibility of being raided. "Everything is pirated here, go to any office and check the computers," said the owner. "Piracy exists everywhere," added the owner of another video rental store. MPAB's Sherab Gyaltshen said that a total enforcement of copyright laws on local businesses selling or renting illegal copies of non-Bhutanese films, music, or software, needed to be further deliberated. "If we clamp down they, and their families, lose their bread and butter."

First joint venture bank ready for business

Bhutan's first joint venture bank and the third bank in the country, Druk PNB Bank Ltd., which opens for business in Thimphu on January 27, says it will change the lending culture in Bhutan. "When we lend we'll focus on the appraisal of the project, collateral requirements will not be a major factor," said the bank's chief executive officer, N K Arora as employees moved behind brand new counters and construction workers on scaffoldings gave finishing touches to the facade of its Thimphu office. Druk PNB, a joint venture between Punjab National Bank (PNB), India, and three Bhutanese promoters got its trade license from the ministry of economic affairs yesterday. It got its banking license - to start operations - on January 20 after a physical inspection by Royal Monetary Authority (RMA) officials to see that it had fulfilled conditions stipulated in the "in principle" license issued in December 2008. The capital contribution is one of the several stipulated conditions. Punjab National Bank (PNB), which owns 51 percent has contributed Nu 153 mn and local promoters who hold 19 percent have put in Nu 57mn. The remaining Nu 90 million will be offered to the public in February to make it a Nu 300 million bank. Interest on housing loans will, however, be maintained at 10 percent, at par with other banks, even though it was 8.5 percent for individual homes in India. "Market conditions are different in India and in Bhutan," said the CEO. "The central bank in India gives indirect incentives to encourage housing." Bank officials said that among the first things it would do is to offer ATM card services, which could be used in any of the 5,000 PNB branches in India. It would also pay interest on saving accounts no matter how many withdrawals are made in a month. The bank will also offer loans to pensioners to a maximum amount of Nu 100,000 or equivalent to 18 months' net pension. Employees holding private jobs and earning at least Nu 200,000 a year will be eligible for personal loans. The bank employs 42 Bhutanese, several of whom are former employees of the existing two banks, and four staff is from PNB, India, including the CEO. It will open its Phuentsholing branch in February. Given the expanding economy, the FDI policy and the mega projects Bhutan really needed to expand the banking sector according to N K Arora. "The economy cannot grow unless the financial sector expands," he said. T Bank, the other venture that was also given the principle approval in December 2008 had earlier said that it would start operations in December last year but later applied for an extension. "Once we make the inspection and if the conditions have been met we will issue the license," said RMA's head of the financial institutions supervisory division, Eden Dema. T Bank does not have an FDI partner and 60 percent of the Nu 200 million

bank is owned by three promoters. The remaining 40 percent will be offered to the public after operations begin.

BDFCL targets 57, 820 rural clients by 2013

The country's sole development bank that caters to rural Bhutanese, the Bhutan development finance corporation Ltd. (BDFCL), is aiming to acquire 57,820 rural credit customers by the end of 2013 as part of its micro-financing mandate. In 2009, BDFCL had 18,627 rural credit customers. Coupled with another projection of disbursing an average loan size of USD 4,724 for either individuals or groups, by December 2013, BDFCL's plan is quite ambitious said Karma T Dorji, the company's manager for agricultural credit operations. On where BDFCL would acquire the money to realize its plans, Karma T Dorji, said, the company is still exploring sources. To help kick start its aggressive micro finance plan, BDFCL recently received USD 1.6mn from the United Nations capital development fund (UNCDF). The fund is part of the UNCDF's efforts to reduce poverty in least developed countries by enabling large scale access to a variety of financial services for low income and poor people, including micro and small businesses. BDFCL has also tied up with India's Bhartiya Samruddhi Investments and Consulting Services Ltd. (BASIX), which will receive USD 679,116 of the UNCDF budget. BASIX will provide, among others, technical services to help strengthen and diversify BDFCL's micro finance capacities, enhance rural outreach, and promote community based grass root collectives. BASIX, since its establishment in 1996, has an outreach of around 20,000 villages in India, which includes the provision of agricultural business development services. Almost USD 82,000 of the UNCDF fund will be reserved for exposure visits for rural credit customers, said Karma T Dorji. This will include visits abroad for 100 rural credit customers, and 500 for within Bhutan, to help them study micro finance experiences in other places and to incorporate ideas. Meanwhile, Karma T Dorji, said, the need for a national micro finance policy had been acknowledged by the government and that stakeholders will commence on creating one this year. BDFCL officials had last year voiced the need for a national policy on micro finance so that it can operate separately from its commercial services. More than 20 percent of Bhutan's estimated 630,000 citizens live on less than US\$ 1 a day, the threshold considered necessary to maintain an adequate standard of living. The government plans to reduce this poverty rate to less than 15 percent by 2013.

International development week is coming up. The UNB International Relations Office has organized International Development Week to inform students about development issues around the world. International Development Week is an event that is put on every year through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), which deals with foreign aid and international development projects. One of the organization's main focuses is to raise awareness about international development. To accomplish their goal CIDA has different campaigns across the country. For the past few years, the International Relations Office at UNB has hosted International Development Week on campus. The office handles student exchanges and works with faculty members to develop relationships with partners overseas. IDW consists of student and faculty groups interested in sharing their knowledge of international development with others. Many UNB students help out with the preparation for this event, but Brian Magee, a work study student in the International Relations office, gave the Brunswickan an peek inside the preparation for this event. "IDW is something that I am very excited for. This year's keynote speaker will definitely

be one of our many the highlights of the week,” says Magee. The keynote speaker is Dr. James Orbinski, a past president of Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders). He is a well-known author and has led a life full of humanitarian work. In 1999, he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of MSF. Dr. Orbinski will be speaking on Wednesday Feb. 10 in MacLaggan Hall. On Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of IDW, students will have the opportunity to attend lunch and learn sessions. Each session will be led by different groups that focus on activities that UNB is involved with and that deal with international work. On Tuesday, there are also speakers from Bhutan. Professors and students visiting from Sherubtse College in Kanglung, Bhutan will share their experiences from Bhutanese universities. Information will also be shared about UNB’s involvement in Bhutan. On Wednesday, the Centre for Property Studies will host a lunch and learn session with students who have been working in Malawi over the past summer. On Thursday, YMCA International will be hosting a presentation on Honduras. IDW will also give students the opportunity to learn about careers available in international development. CIDA will be here on Thursday afternoon to introduce students to the responsibilities of a job in international development. Throughout the week donations will be accepted for the relief efforts in Haiti. Financing for students to pursue tertiary education, frameworks to attract leading universities and establishing entities to monitor quality and review tertiary education policies are some of the key features of the country’s first tertiary education policy that is awaiting government approval. The education ministry yesterday proposed these features from its eight policy documents on the country’s tertiary education, to the cabinet for approval. On the financing structure, the director for adult and higher education department, Karma Yeshey, who presented the policy document to the cabinet, suggested that public colleges receive only the capital expenditure like land grant and new infrastructure from the government. Colleges, he said, should charge the students for all operating expenditures such as administering a programme, faculty, management cost and materials, which would be calculated “per student per course”. Upon securing admission in colleges, students could apply for government funding which again would either be full scholarship, partial grant or loans depending on a student’s need and merit. “We need to support students through such schemes to make tertiary education accessible to them,” said Karma Yeshey. “Most education loans that our financial institutions provide today are commercial in nature.” He said that would help open up access to tertiary education, enhance quality and develop Bhutan into a knowledge hub. Education secretary Sangay Zam pointed out that while the government might provide infrastructure to public colleges and universities initially, its support, she argued, should extend to the institution offering better quality and choice of programmes regardless of whether they were public or private. On attracting international students, Karma Yeshey, said some of the leading institutions in the world should be allowed to start colleges in the country, while Bhutan could provide some unique courses like Buddhist studies and climate change, bearing in mind competition from other countries. Karma Yeshey also proposed the establishment of a national tertiary board to access how education in tertiary institutions were being carried out, rate universities and review the education policies. Another separate entity, called the Bhutan accreditation council, is proposed as an overall authority to assure standards in colleges and universities. It would also recognise qualifications and ensure that programmes the country’s premium institutions proffer match international standards. Finally, the director

proposed the need to create an annual performance compact between tertiary institutions and the tertiary education board spelling out the targets expected in terms of capacity, academic achievement and employability. The education minister, Lyonpo Thakur S Powdyel said the policy document drew its life from Article 9, section 15 and 16 of the country's constitution. He explained that although tertiary education would extend to civil servants and others out of mainstream education, it would still remain a privilege. "If you follow the constitution in spirit not everybody can pursue a tertiary education, while basic education is their right," said Lyonpo Thakur S Powdyel. Lyonchhoen Jigmi Y Thinley said the cabinet ministers endorsed the policy document in principle on the basis that it was dynamic and evolving. He explained that although the policy document would provide a framework and guide the country's tertiary education system in areas, which remained undefined and gray, certain sections required clarification. Of the many proposals, the Lyonchhoen said that the cabinet had to look into specific lines of some proposals and deliberate on the practicality of others. He also said that some of the proposals pertaining to other government agencies had to be discussed with them. "The proposals and the policy documents will be discussed in the next session of the cabinet meeting," said Lyonchhoen Jigmi Y Thinley. "They will be approved then."

13 countries meet in bid to save wild tigers

HUA HIN, Thailand -- Efforts to save the wild tiger are at a critical point and it will take greater political will and cooperation from Asian countries to prevent the big cats from becoming extinct, conservationists and the World Bank warned Wednesday. The dire message was offered to 13 tiger range states attending the first Ministerial Conference on Tiger Conservation. The aim of the three-day meeting is to convince countries to pledge to spend more on tiger conservation and set targets for boosting their numbers - vows that would then be finalized by heads of state in September at a meeting in Vladivostok, Russia. "There will be no room left for tigers and other wildlife in Asia without a more responsible and sustainable program for economic growth and infrastructure," World Bank President Robert Zoellick said in a video message to the 180 delegates. "The tiger may be only one species, but the tigers' plight highlights the biodiversity crisis in Asia," he said. Thailand's Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Suwit Khunkitti told delegates the time had come for his fellow ministers to commit to "bold commitments and actions so that we can collectively turn the tide of extinction on the tiger." Tiger numbers have plummeted because of human encroachment, the loss of more than nine-tenths of their habitat, and poaching to supply the vibrant trade in tiger parts. From an estimated 100,000 at the beginning of the 20th century, the number today is less than 3,600. John Seidensticker, head of conservation ecology at the Smithsonian National Zoological Park and chairman of the Save the Tiger Fund, recalled how he watched the Javan and Bali tigers disappear in the 20th century, adding that "losing a tiger is like losing a very close, dear relative and I'm still saddened by that experience." He said conservationists have over the years been successful in banning trade in tiger parts, outlawing hunting and boosting protection measures. But he said he and others never foresaw the breakneck economic development in Asia that would "pave over" key tiger forests and grasslands and create a market for tiger parts that has caused poaching to skyrocket. Still, Seidensticker and others said the meeting itself offered hope, showing that the bid to save tigers has gone beyond passionate environmentalists and scientists

and is now being embraced by government officials and key donors like the World Bank. The meeting is being organized by Thailand and the Global Tiger Initiative, a coalition formed in 2008 by the World Bank, the Smithsonian Institute and nearly 40 conservation groups. It aims to double tiger numbers by 2022.

"That this meeting is happening is hugely important," said John Robinson, executive vice president of conservation and science for the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society. Robinson said the political will to save the tigers must be strengthened, funding increased for impoverished countries where tigers remain and forests expanded to ensure that tigers and humans don't clash - a problem especially common in India and Indonesia. Relocating communities is an option as long as the villagers are compensated adequately, Robinson said. The World Bank said countries must work to minimize the impact of roads, bridges and other infrastructure projects on tiger habitat - something the bank has vowed to do in projects it funds. It also called on countries to better train and equip their forest rangers and reduce corruption in the government agencies tasked with running national parks and protected areas. "Corruption has been rampant and all pervasive in some of the countries as far as forest management is concerned," said Keshav Varma, the Global Tiger Initiative's program director, told delegates. "Corruption is gradually and persistently nibbling away at our natural resources. The politics of money is drowning out the weak voices of the tiger and the poor." The 13 countries attending the meeting are Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Russia, Thailand and Vietnam.