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BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

South Asia

Weekly Report 107: from 12th Feb to 19th Feb. 2010

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DETAILED NEWS

BANGLADESH

India toughens visa rules for Bangladesh

New Delhi, Feb 19 (bdnews24.com) – If a Bangladesh national is planning to attend an international conference or seminar or workshop in India, he or she should seek visa well in event. A tighter visa procedure has been imposed on citizens of Bangladesh and seven other countries, and they will get visas only after the home ministry in New Delhi issues the security clearance for them. The Indian home ministry has issued new instructions to all central ministries and departments as well as the chief secretaries of the governments of all its states and union territories to strictly adhere to the revised procedure for granting Conference Visas to foreign participants in international meets. "The security clearance for grant of Conference Visa will be required from the Ministry of Home Affairs only in case of participants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Sudan as well as for stateless persons and in case of citizens of any country with origin in Pakistan," home ministry spokesperson Onkar Kedia said. "The participants from other countries could obtain Conference Visa from the Indian Embassies, High Commissions and Consulates on production of the invitation letters from the organizers of the events as well as clearances from the Ministry of Home Affairs to hold the meets, administrative approvals of the respective nodal ministries of the Union Government, political clearances from the Ministry of External Affairs and clearances from the respective Governments of the States and Union Territories," said Kedia, additional director general at the ministry. He added that the fresh instructions had been issued to ensure that all organizers of such international events strictly adhere to the time line for submitting their proposals to the home ministry at least six weeks before the event. "This would ensure that security clearance for the event and for the participants could be suitably assessed. Security vetting is a time-consuming process and most of the organisers of international events have not been strictly adhering to the prescribed time schedules," added Kedia. The Indian government had earlier on July 15 last year revised the procedures for grant of conference visa to foreign citizens. "But the revised procedures were not being implemented properly across the country," an official said. From now, the Foreigners Division of the home ministry will grant "in-principle approval" for holding international conferences, seminars or similar events.

Jammu and Kashmir: Revisiting India's partition

New Delhi, India — Just days after the deadly terror attack in the Indian city of Pune on Feb. 13 that killed nine people and injured 45, top al-Qaida terrorist commander Ilyas Kashmiri vowed to continue attacks across India. In a message to a media group, Kashmiri, whose 313 Brigade is an operational arm of al-Qaida, said his group will attack India until the Indian Army leaves Kashmir. Interestingly, India, which had suspended all official talks with Pakistan following the 2008 Mumbai attacks by Muslim terrorists from Pakistan, has now decided to hold secretary-level talks in New Delhi on Feb. 25. While Indian officials say terrorism will be the main subject of discussion during the talks, Pakistan, as expected, has raised its pitch over Kashmir. Over the last fortnight or so, it has encouraged huge rallies in Lahore demanding that India leave the Kashmir region

controlled by Pakistan. In response, India's Home Minister P. Chidambaram issued a statement saying he would welcome the return of Indians from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Now, strictly going by the Indian Constitution, all Kashmiri people living in areas controlled by Pakistan are Indian citizens. So if the people return to India-controlled Kashmir, would that mean India is prepared to forgo the territory under Pakistan's control in exchange for the population? Viewed thus, Chidambaram's statement is untimely and also bizarre, like the prescription of some "liberal Indians" who believe that Kashmiri people should be allowed independence if they do not want to remain with India. It is no surprise that in the past few months separatists in Kashmir have made it crystal clear, in their numerous rallies decked with Pakistani flags, that since Kashmir is essentially a Muslim-majority area, Muslims there cannot co-exist with non-Muslims, who otherwise constitute India's majority. In other words, Muslims cannot be part of a non-Muslim India. This writer got a rude shock when a highly educated Kashmiri friend pointed out that Kashmiri people are no longer learning the Kashmiri script, as it is in Sanskrit. Rather, Kashmiri children are only learning Urdu and even avoiding making conversations in Kashmiri, one of India's richest languages. This is nothing but the reassertion of the so-called "two-nation theory," on the basis of which the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947, whether one admits it or not. If liberals accept the theory, what do they have to say about Muslims living in other parts of India? Secondly, and more important, nobody is highlighting how India should allow independence in Kashmir. Will the process be conditional? This question of conditionality is important. When India was partitioned in 1947, the population figures were about 330 million, 27 million and 30 million people in India, West Pakistan and Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) respectively. In terms of area, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh constituted roughly 1.3, 0.3 and 0.06 million square miles respectively. The population percentages were 85 percent and 15 percent and land percentages 75 percent and 25 percent for India and united West and East Pakistan. But then united Pakistan was meant for all Muslims of the subcontinent, just as Israel is for all Jews of the world. If all Muslims of pre-August 1947 India had decided to move to united Pakistan, Pakistani rulers could not have said or done anything to the contrary. There have always been exchanges of population in cases of partition elsewhere in the world. The cases of Greece-Turkey, Germany-Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria-Turkey, Poland-Germany, Bosnia-Serbia and Croatia-Serbia are recent examples where full-scale exchanges of populations took place, some even arranged by the United Nations. However, in the case of India's partition, a systematic exchange of populations never took place. In fact, every liberal, secular and democratic Indian should be proud of the fact that even after partition, India continues to have more Muslims than Pakistan or Bangladesh. That being the case, in 1947, India had to accommodate 85 percent of the population in 75 percent of the undivided land in the subcontinent. So the land deal was extremely unfair, as Pakistan then got a much better deal during the partition compared to India. It may be argued here that the father of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, talked of a Pakistan where every religious community could reside. He did not insist that Hindus and Sikhs flee Pakistan, despite the horrendous ethnic cleansing that took place in some border states of both India and Pakistan during that time. But the present situation is radically different. In 1947, Hindus constituted over 20 percent in West Pakistan and 36 percent in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Now, they are less than 1 percent in Pakistan and about 8 percent in Bangladesh. In contrast, the Muslim

population in India has risen from about 10 percent in 1947 to about 15 percent today. In other words, Pakistan and Bangladesh now have fewer reasons to explain why they should have disproportionate land vis-à-vis India. Clearly, India is the aggrieved party over the manner in which the partition was sustained. Now when one talks of “azadi,” or independence for Kashmir, he or she is precisely reopening the question of partition. Talking of allowing Kashmiris to secede just because Muslims cannot remain in Hindu-majority India means the process of partitioning India still remains incomplete. And if that is the case, India has every right to demand the readjustment of territories involving both India and Bangladesh. Are the Kashmiri separatists and their liberal supporters prepared for such an eventuality? Let Kashmir secede, but simultaneously both Pakistan and Bangladesh must be told to return to India the excess land they have. Some liberals could counterargue that Kashmir’s case is different because of its ethnicity, which is distinct from religion. If ethnicity could be the basis of dividing and uniting nations, then Pakistan and Bangladesh have no right to exist as sovereign countries since Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are ethnically the same and geographically belong to the same landmass, and have common flora and fauna. If geography and ethnicity are to be interpreted negatively, then too Pakistan’s legitimacy can be challenged, given the perpetual clashes between Shiites and Sunnis, including the ever-disenchanted Muhajirs, whose leaders have gone on record and said that partitioning India was “a historic blunder.” If Kashmiri separatists, their official sponsors in Pakistan and their liberal supporters in India argue that Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims cannot coexist in Jammu and Kashmir, and therefore Muslims must either join Pakistan or form an independent country, then they should convince their Muslim brethren in the rest of India that they have done wrong by staying back in India and that they all should migrate either to Pakistan or Bangladesh, failing which the two countries should return excess territories to India. This is not suggestive of undoing the partition, but emphasizing that the “Kashmir for Muslims” approach is aggravating the crisis not only in Kashmir but also in the rest of the Indian subcontinent.

Thai Diplomat Dies In Bangladesh Road Accident

DHAKA: A Thai diplomat has been killed in northern Bangladesh when her vehicle — part of a convoy accompanying Thai Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn — had a fatal head on collision, police said Friday. Pannyee Lickanjule, 55, deputy head of mission at Thailand’s Embassy in Dhaka, was accompanying Princess Sirindhorn on a trip to a rural development project, the Tangail district police chief said. The minibus Pannyee was travelling in “had fallen behind the Princess’s motorcade and collided head on with a truck laden with iron-rods. The minibus plunged into a ditch,” Mizanur Rahman told AFP. Pannyee suffered extensive chest injuries, was rushed to hospital but died almost immediately, Rahman said, adding that the driver of the iron-rod truck had abandoned the vehicle and fled the scene of the accident. Road accidents are common in Bangladesh and kill some 5,000 people a year. Shoddy highways, lax enforcement of traffic rules and commercial truck drivers’ wanton disregard for road safety are blamed for most of the accidents. -- _

Apang Urges Centre to Take Up Bdr Firing With bangladesh
Raju Das Meghalaya Chief Minister DD Lapang today apprised the Union

Home Minister, P Chidambaram about the plight of the displaced people in Muktapur and requested him to take up the matter at his level with the Bangladesh Government. Meanwhile, panic-stricken villagers along the Indo-Bangla border near Muktapur, Jaintia Hills district, have moved out and are taking refuge in nearby jungles and villages for safety after Sunday's "unprovoked firing" by Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). The bullet marks on the walls of houses in Muktapur village bear evidence of BDR's firing across the border. Over 600 rounds of fire were exchanged intermittently in a span of four hours between the Border Security Force (BSF) and the BDR on Sunday. This was the second such firing incident reported between the two border guarding forces in less than a fortnight in the area. The Muktapur LP School building bore several bullet marks, so too an adjacent temple. There were bullet marks on other sites in the village too. "We don't feel secure here anymore so the women and children and many others have moved out of the villages. We have never come across such heavy exchange of fire in our lifetime," Muktapur's former headmen, Manoj Mannar narrated. About 100 odd families, especially those with women and children have moved out of Muktapur, Amki, Amlympiang, Amsynram and other villages along the Indo-Bangla border. They are either taking shelter in villages far from the border or are taking refuge in makeshift tents set up in nearby jungles. "Nobody from the State Government has visited us after Sunday's firing. There is a lot of insecurity here," Mannar lamented. However, Minister in-charge, Border Area Development, Prestone Tynsong told *The Assam Tribune*, necessary instructions have been given to the Deputy Commissioner of Jaintia Hills to assist the displaced people with the help of the BSF. BSF Inspector General (Assam-Meghalaya) Frontier, Prithviraj, meanwhile, said, the situation was normal in the area and both sides have agreed to "maintain status quo" in the area. Muktapur is in adverse possession of India. Bangladesh claims it as part of its territory. Some 20 km west of Muktapur is Pyrdiwah, another village claimed by Bangladesh and in 2001, BDR unsuccessfully tried to seize it. Prithviraj believes that trouble in Muktapur started after a particular "over-enthusiastic" BDR commandant took over recently.

Agartala Trade Fair Focuses on Trade with Bangladesh

Agartala, Feb 19 (ANI): The 20th Industry and Trade Fair held recently in Agartala focused on promoting bilateral trade with Bangladesh. During the ten-day Agartala Industry and Trade Fair, Bangladeshi business delegates interacted with businessmen from Assam, Mizoram and other parts of India. Bangladesh made furniture; plastic items and food-beverages were exhibited at the fair. It is hoped that the fair will facilitate trade and commerce between India and Bangladesh and boost investment. Our participation in the fair at Tripura has been good as customers are accepting our products well. The response from customers is favorable. Bangladeshi investors are going to invest for the first time in Tripura. Very soon we will set up a food products factory here," said Maruf, a businessman from Bangladesh. "You can get varieties of products from a single place. Many stalls from different places like Bangladesh are participating in the fair," said Habul Biswas, a visitor. India is Bangladesh's largest trading partner in terms of imports and exports with an annual import of about two billion dollars worth of products and an export of nearly 400 million dollars. "A new era of improving bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India has started. This will benefit both the nations and hopefully lead

Bangladesh to become an industrially developed nation. There will be improvement in trade and industry, communication and more investment between the two nations," said Bangladesh Industry Minister Dilip Barua. "For development in this region, greater interaction amongst the people of these two Nations, Bangladesh and India through such trade fairs, tourism, and through participation in education and other exercises will improve the standard of living," said economist Amitabha Sinha. More regional and sub-regional economic relations with neighbouring countries like Bangladesh would provide enormous scope to develop trade and business in India, especially in the northeast region. By Pinaki Das (ANI)

Exiled Bangladesh Author Gets 'Last' Indian Visa

NEW DELHI — Bangladesh writer Taslima Nasreen, forced to flee her homeland by Muslim extremists, said Wednesday that India had told her it will no longer renew her residence visa after the current one expires. Nasreen, who has been unable to live full-time in India because of opposition from Muslim hardliners in the country, said the Indian government had renewed her temporary six-month residence permit. But 47-year-old author, who has spent the past two years mainly in the United States, said the government told her it was "the last time" the permit would be extended. "I don't know where I will go if India does not give me shelter," Nasreen told AFP by telephone from an undisclosed location in the Indian capital where she was under federal protection. There was no immediate comment from the Indian home ministry. The gynaecologist-turned-author holds Swedish citizenship but she has long been seeking permanent residence in India, which she describes as her "cultural home." The author was hounded out of India in March 2008 by Muslim radicals and moved to the United States. "Sometimes it seems I am facing a slow death, standing at a bus stop to shuttle between Paris and New York, London and Washington," she told AFP last week. Nasreen was forced to flee Bangladesh in 1994 after radical Muslims accused her of blasphemy over her novel "Lajja" (Shame), in which a Hindu family is persecuted by Muslims. She spent the next 10 years in Europe and the United States before India granted her a temporary residential permit in 2004. She moved to Kolkata in the state of West Bengal, adjoining Bangladesh. But seething resentment by Muslim extremists at her presence in the city exploded into full-blown riots in November 2007, which resulted in the army being called out. Afterwards, Nasreen, whose situation has been likened to that of Indian-born British author Salman Rushdie, went into hiding in New Delhi but was eventually forced to leave India.

Bangladesh embankments 'must be rebuilt'

Aid agencies have called on the Bangladeshi government to urgently speed up work rebuilding hundreds of kilometres of coastal embankments. The embankments were destroyed by a cyclone last May.

The agencies have warned that repairs must be done by the end of March, when high tides and storms are expected. They say that unless the work is completed, more than 200,000 homeless people will have to face another monsoon in appalling conditions. This would be "inhuman and unacceptable on any grounds, and a serious issue of human and fundamental rights violation", the group of 20 relief agencies working in south-west Bangladesh said in a news release. "We stress that the response and rehabilitation work

that we have been continuing in the affected regions are gradually appearing as a waste of limited resources, unless embankments are reconstructed and repaired," the group, which includes Oxfam, Care, Catholic Relief Services, Save the Children and Muslim Aid, added. It is an unusually strong statement - reflecting the aid agencies' deep frustration with the slow response of the authorities. 'Full swing' When Cyclone Aila crashed into Bangladesh, it destroyed more than 700km (434 miles) of coastal embankments. Sea water rushed through the gaps, flooding villages and fields. More than 200,000 people lost their homes and livelihoods - and most of them are now living in squalid, makeshift shelters, squeezed together on the surviving strips of raised land. The obvious solution was to repair the embankments as soon as possible. Tenders for the work only went out in December. The government agency responsible for the repairs said it has been able to fix up to 450km (279 miles) of embankments and is confident of completing the job in time. "We can repair the damaged embankments by March. Our activities are going on full swing," Habibur Rahman, director general of the Bangladesh Water Development Board told the BBC. But many aid workers in the region doubt that this is possible.

BBC reaches Bangladesh mobile phone landmark

Mobile phone users in Bangladesh have accessed more than one million English lessons using a new service, BBC World Service Trust (WST) officials say.

The WST - the BBC's international development agency - says that the BBC Janala (Window) service is transforming the way people learn the language. Launched in November 2009, the service has proved popular with the country's 50 million mobile users. Many of them want to learn English to improve access to the global economy. The BBC WST says the BBC Janala service is the first of its kind in the world and has turned the mobile phone into a low-cost education device by offering hundreds of three-minute audio lessons and SMS quizzes through people's handsets. By simply dialling 3000, almost anyone in Bangladesh can participate in new classes each day, ranging from essential English for beginners, to story telling in English. The BBC WST says that so far 1,030,583 lessons have been accessed, with users engaging with Janala's interactive services, which include audio quizzes, English story recording and direct feedback, an additional 130,000 times. "Part of its success is the price, with the BBC teaming up with all of Bangladesh's mobile operators to offer a national service at half the cost of a typical call or SMS - just 1 Taka (1 pence) a minute," said BBC WST spokesman Damian Wilson.

Bangladesh Launches 'Smart Cards' For Farm

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has inaugurated a new smart card scheme for farmers designed to increase productivity and reduce fraud. Almost 20 million small or medium-sized farms in Bangladesh will eventually get the card, which will allow them to open bank accounts with just a few cents. It will allow the government to pay subsidies directly to them, cutting out middlemen and embezzlers. They currently siphon off a large proportion of the government's help. The first use of the card will be to distribute a \$100m fuel subsidy. The cards will also contain information on the land the farmers have under cultivation, the crops they produce and the fertilizers they will need. "An interactive database of farmers has been prepared to run in conjunction with the scheme," said Agriculture Secretary Mustaq Ahmed, "which will help the government make detailed

analysis of the inputs that farmers need."We can then make efficient planning for agriculture, while farmers who have never been linked to the banks will become more money-literate once they start going to them.

"They will then begin to take loans from banks - instead of rural moneylenders who charge high interest rates for farmers. It will also make farmers more aware of modern agriculture technologies."Mr Ahmed said that he hoped the initiatives would bring "revolutionary change to the agricultural sector".

Bangladesh: Pm Opens Distribution of Agri-Input Cards in Netrakona

NETRAKONA, Bangladesh Feb 16 (NNN-BSS) – Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina today called on the farmers to make Bangladesh self-sufficient in food by boosting agricultural production across the country. The Prime Minister made the call while inaugurating the distribution of cash money and agricultural inputs assistance cards among the farmers at a function in Teligati union under Atpara upazila of the district. The programme has been undertaken to give subsidy to the farmers for irrigation ahead of the upcoming IRRI-Boro season.

Bangladesh To Amend Law To Restore Properties To Hindus: Minister

DHAKA: The Awami League-led government will amend a controversial Bangladeshi law to restore properties seized from minority groups, mainly Hindus, a minister said here on Tuesday. The Parliament will pass the Vested Property Return (amendment) Act 2009 during the ongoing session, said state minister for land Mustafizur Rahman. In November, the ruling Awami League government had approved the amendment under which vested properties of the minority community, mainly Hindus, will be returned to them, the Star Online said. The law has been flayed by the minority community in the country as it was used to capture their properties before Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan in 1971. The minister said after the passage of the amendment, a five-member committee will be formed at district and sub-division level to settle all land related disputes. Speaking at a round table, Rahman said the ministry will also set up a tribunal with a retired justice to settle the matters.

One Dead, 50 Hurt In Bangladesh Opposition Protest

DHAKA (Reuters) - One demonstrator was killed and 50 were injured when police fired tear gas to disperse opposition activists in the Bangladesh capital Dhaka on Thursday, police and witnesses said. Demonstrators from the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) set fire to a police vehicle during a march through the capital to denounce mass arrests of student activists. Police fired tear gas and moved against the protesters with batons."The man was run over by a bus while trying to run for cover during police action," a BNP leader told reporters. Demonstrators suffered injuries after being struck by batons or falling while trying to avoid the police charge. The BNP official said police acted against protesters when they were already returning from a protest venue. Police said they acted to protect public property. The protest was one of dozens called across the country in response to arrests prompted by campus unrest. Demonstrators said they were also unhappy at rulings barring BNP members from addressing parliament. Other rallies were generally peaceful. It was the first countrywide protest since Prime Minister Sheikh

Hasina returned to power after a December 2008 parliamentary election that ended a two-year period of rule by an army-backed interim government.

Per Capita Meat Consumption Declines By 1.7pc

LAHORE: Though per capita meat, milk and egg consumption in Pakistan is still significantly higher than in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, its livestock production has remained lopsided with meat consumption per person declining by 1.7 per cent. The latest report of Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) reveals that the per capita meat consumption in Pakistan declined from 14.5 kg per annum in 1995 to 12.2 kg in 2007. This was the period when the food inflation in Pakistan was under control. Though data after this period is not available; consumption has surely declined after a sharp increase in the rates of mutton, beef and poultry meat. However, despite this decline of 1.7 per cent in the meat consumption Pakistan fares much better than Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka where the per capita meat consumption stands at 3.1, 5.1, 9.7 and 7.1 kg per annum. Another point worth noting is that all these countries recorded increase in per capita meat consumption which grew by 0.7 per cent in Bangladesh, 0.8 per cent in India, 0.3 per cent in Nepal and by 3.0 per cent in Sri Lanka. Consumption of meat in all these countries, however, is much less than the global per capita average of 41.2 kg per year. China has a per capita consumption of 59.5 kg per annum which is 4.5 per cent higher than in 1995. It is worth noting that meat production in Pakistan increased from 1.857 million tons in 1995 to 2.161 million tons in 2007 – an increase of 1.7 per cent which was lower than the increase in its population. Bangladesh's meat production during this period grew by 2.6 per cent to 502000 tons while that of India also increased by 2.6 per cent to 6.322 million tons; Nepal registered an increase of 2.3 per cent to produce 270000 tons of meat. The productivity in these countries was above their population growth. Sri Lanka registered lowest growth after Pakistan but was still positive at 0.3 per cent. China registered an increase of 5.6 per cent in meat production during this period to 88.681 million ton per annum. However, in dairy production Pakistan out performed its South Asian neighbors, lagging way behind China in productivity growth but was way ahead in per capita milk consumption. According to FAO statistics the per capita milk consumption in Pakistan increased from 126.1 kg per annum to 158.3 kg per annum registering an increase of 2.3 per cent. Milk consumption in Bangladesh was pathetically low at 15.1 kg per annum registering an increase of 1.4 per cent since 1995. India registered a per capita milk consumption increase of 1.2 per cent to 65.2 kg per annum. Per capita milk consumption in Nepal increased by 1.1 per cent to 40.7 kg per annum while it declined by 0.2 per cent in Sri Lanka to 30.8 kg per annum. The global average per capita milk consumption is 82.1 kg per annum and Pakistan's consumption of milk is almost the double of global average but is not the highest in the world. Sweden with per capita milk consumption of 367 kg per annum is the largest consumer in the world. India is the largest producer of milk in the world followed by the United States, China and Pakistan. China registered a phenomenal growth of over 12 per cent in milk production during 1995-2007. According to the report, livestock is a major activity that helps people come out of poverty. It states that 47 per cent of the rural households in Pakistan own livestock and 11 per cent of their income come from livestock. <http://www.thenews.com.pk/print1.asp?id=225088>

Bangladesh 'cracking down on myanmar migrants'

DHAKA — A crackdown by Bangladeshi authorities has triggered a "humanitarian catastrophe" for the country's unregistered population of Rohingya refugees, according to a report released Tuesday. The authorities launched an "unprecedented" campaign against the ethnic Muslims from Myanmar on January 2, pushing thousands into an unofficial refugee camp, a report by the Arakan Project lobby group said. In the makeshift camp in Kutuplaong on the Myanmar border, "food insecurity and hunger is spreading rapidly and a serious humanitarian crisis is looming," the report by the Bangkok-based group said. "A major humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding for the unprotected Rohingya in Bangladesh," the report added. "This will deteriorate if the Bangladesh authorities do not immediately put an end to this massive crackdown and continue to deny access to food and livelihood to the unregistered Rohingya refugees." Police round-ups, leading to arrest or illegal forced deportation, are common and the local media has launched a "xenophobic campaign" against the Rohingya, stirring up local resentment, the report added. It also claimed instances of theft, rape and assaults against unregistered Rohingya soared last month. Described by the United Nations as one of the most persecuted minorities on earth, thousands of Rohingyas from Myanmar's northern Rakhaine state stream across the border every year. They are now estimated to number nearly 400,000. Around 8,000 are believed to have fled in 2009. There are an estimated 700,000 Rohingya in Myanmar, where they are not recognised as citizens and have no right to own land and are forbidden from marrying or travelling without permission. Police on the border with Myanmar told AFP Tuesday that they had arrested nearly 149 Rohingyas last month as they tried to enter Bangladesh and had pushed back 112. The report claims the repatriation policy is illegal. "This month, we have arrested over 50 and pushed all of them back into Myanmar. It is an ongoing operation," said Rafiqul Islam, chief of the local police in Kutuplaong on the Myanmar border. Islam said the crackdown, prompted by a rise in the number of Rohingya asylum seekers who were clearing forest and building shanty towns around the Kutuplaong camp, was an attempt to stop further migration. "If we don't stop them, the floodgates will open," he said.

UK Student visa ban partially lifted in India, Bangladesh and Nepal

Students from North India, Bangladesh and Nepal wishing to study in a higher education course will from 1 March 2010 again be able to apply for an UK student visa. This will help thousands of students who have been unable to apply for a student visa since 1 February 2010. Pat McFadden, the Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills, had the following to say, "The suspension was taken in response to a huge surge in applications over a very short period of time." "I am delighted to be able to announce today that, from 1 March, this suspension will be lifted for all students wanting to study higher education courses, whether foundation degrees, undergraduate or postgraduate." Unfortunately the ban will continue for the time being for student applicants who wish to enter the UK to study at a level lower than undergraduate level. McFadden had the following to say: "But we will continue to keep this under review and will lift it as soon as we can, and once the new 'highly trusted sponsor' system for colleges and other educational establishments across the UK is in place." It is estimated that Indian students and other international students bring with them 8.5 billion pounds of income annually. British Universities are

also very dependent on overseas student fee income. Overseas students pay far higher fees than local students. Recently UK immigration brought in tougher requirements for overseas students. Those students below degree level can now only work ten hours a week compared to the previous twenty hours a week. The UK Home Secretary Alan Johnson said that it will be more difficult for "bogus students" to come to the UK. Johnson also said: "The points-based system was introduced to provide a rigorous system to manage legitimate access to the U.K. to work and study, with the ability to respond to changing circumstances. We want foreign students to come here to study, not to work illegally, and today we have set out necessary steps which will maintain the robustness of the system we introduced last year. I make no apologies for that." There have been major changes in the UK student visa system since March 2009 when all students had to be sponsored by a college licensed by the UK Border Agency.

U.S.-FUNDED CONFERENCE ON WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS INAUGURATED IN BANGLADESH

Dhaka, Bangladesh (AHN) - A national conference on "Anti-corruption Reform Efforts for Women Entrepreneurs" opened in the capital, Dhaka on Wednesday to promote anti-corruption activities. U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh James F. Moriarty and Commerce Minister Muhammad Faruk Khan jointly inaugurated the conference, a U.S. embassy press statement said in Dhaka. The United States government, through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), funded this conference as part of its good governance initiative called "PROGATI" - promoting governance, accountability transparency and integrity program. Under this initiative, PROGATI brought together 300 women entrepreneurs in Chittagong, Sylhet and Khulna to promote anti-corruption activities, the statement said, adding that the entrepreneurs identified how they experience corruption in their professional lives. "The participants cited taxation, access to credit, and business development services as the key areas where corruption was most pronounced. The participants analyzed how existing laws and policies protect women entrepreneurs and where new laws and policies are necessary. The entrepreneurs also held advocacy events in their home districts to promote necessary policy change," it noted. The U.S. government, through USAID, is working to improve the lives of the people of Bangladesh, especially the very poor. The USAID administers programs in Bangladesh in five broad areas: improving health and pre-primary education, creating income opportunities for rural poor, supporting good governance, enhancing food security, and strengthening disaster preparedness and providing emergency assistance following natural disasters. The U.S. government has provided more than US\$5.5 billion in assistance to Bangladesh since 1971. In 2010, U.S. assistance will total approximately \$170 million.

Mama Maker Thai President Foods Looks to Bangladesh

Thai President Foods, manufacturer of Mama instant noodles, yesterday announced its expansion into South Asia, with plans for its first joint venture in the region in Bangladesh. Company president Pipat Paniangvait said Thai President Foods was seeking to offset the domestic slowdown in the instant noodle market in Thailand, which was levelling off at 40 packs per head per year. "We're going to penetrate new potential

markets in South Asia, particularly Bangladesh and India," he said. "To this end, we're negotiating with potential partners in Bangladesh for a JV for setting up an instant noodle factory there. The initial cost in that country will be US\$1 million to \$2 million [Bt33.18 million to Bt66.37 million]. Negotiations will be concluded this year." "We've rejigged our foreign investment policy to where we'll insist on owning more than 50 per cent of any JV. The move will benefit our consolidated bottom line and the growth of Thai President Foods." "The company considers Bangladesh a potential market for its instant noodles because of the country's population of 154 million, more than double the size of Thailand's. Bangladesh's instant noodle market amounts to 30,000 cases a month and is now dominated by only two brands. Thai President Foods already has JV instant noodle factories in Burma and Cambodia, each one producing 20, 00030,000 cases a month." "Last year, we raised our capital in our JV factory in Chongqing, China to 42 million yuan (Bt204 million), from 14 million yuan before. The increase has been used to acquire an instant noodle factory in Chentu and build a new one in Nanjing," said Pipat. Domestically, the company yesterday announced it would spend Bt500 million this year to boost production at its factory in Chon Buri's Sri Racha district. Of that amount, Bt150 million will be used to buy a new noodle cup machine. It will start operation this year, tripling capacity to about 500 cups a minute. "This new machine will allow us to cash in on the great potential of the noodle cup segment in Thailand, which we expect to grow quite rapidly, from 6 per cent of the instant noodle market now to more than 20 per cent in the next three years," said Pipat. He said the company would also purchase two new machines for the production of Mama instant noodle packs. Each one will cost Bt60 million to Bt70 million and produce 200,000 packs a day, increasing total capacity to 6.5 million packs a day. Thai President Foods achieved sales growth of 6.03 per cent for Mama instant noodles last year, to Bt7.4 billion.

Bangladesh's Banks To Introduce Banking Program For Schoolchildren
Dhaka, Bangladesh (AHN) - Bangladesh's commercial banks to introduce banking program for schoolchildren, officials told AHN Media. The goal is to educate the young people about personal finance. Under the banking system, interested students from class six to class twelve will be able to open accounts with banks with a nominal deposit of only US\$1.44 (BDT 100). "The members of Bangladesh Association of Banks (BAB), the apex forum of country's private commercial banks, have agreed at a meeting with the governor to launch such banking for acquainting the students with the banking facilities," a senior official of the Bangladesh Bank (BB), the country's central bank, told AHN in Dhaka. He also said different issues including responsibilities and accountability of the board of directors and the chief executive officers (CEOs) of all banks were discussed at the meeting. On February 4 this year, the central bank of Bangladesh issued a circular in this connection and asked the board of directors and the CEOs of all 47 scheduled banks to maintain the instructions properly. The board will be vigilant on the internal control system of the bank in order to attain and maintain satisfactory qualitative standard of its loan or investment portfolio, the central bank said.

Seminar on Business Opportunities In Bangladesh In Singapore Feb 23

A seminar on "Investment Climate and Business Opportunities in Bangladesh will begin in Singapore on February 23 with an objective to showcase high value and high return

projects and investments before the Singaporean entrepreneurs. To be inaugurated at Little Red Dot Seminar Room, the seminar has jointly arranged by the Bangladesh High Commissioner, Singapore, Business Federation- South Asian Business Group and International Enterprise, Singapore. While highlighting the objectives of the seminar, Iren Pervin Badhan, Counsellor of Bangladesh High Commission told BSS on Friday over phone that special thrusts would be given in the seminar to focus on Real Estate Infrastructure, Health Service, Pharmaceuticals, Tourism, Agribusiness and Manufacturing sectors. Special efforts would be made to highlight the investment potentialities and investment-friendly opportunities that exist in Bangladesh, especially in Dhaka and Chittagong, she added. The trade counsellor said that the main purpose of this seminar would be to gain a better understanding on the new regulatory requirements as well as financial tools available for investment in Bangladesh. Singapore is a leading investor in Bangladesh with investment amounting to about half a billion US dollars where investment as of now mainly centralized on telecommunications and textiles. Singapore is also a leading trade partner of Bangladesh and the volume of bilateral trade had increased from US Dollar 1.77 billion in 2008 to US Dollar 1.97 billion in 2009. Dr SA Samad, Executive chairman of Bangladesh Investment Board (BOI) will present key-note speech in the seminar while Bangladesh High Commissioner to Singapore Kamrul Ahsan will give address of welcome. The key-note papers would be presented in the seminar "Regulatory Framework Governing Investment in Bangladesh" by Syed Yusuf Hossain, Chairman Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission, "Key Sectors and Projects for Investment in Private-Public Partnership Basis" by M Anis Ud Dowla, President Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry and "Overview of Financial Incentives and Options available for Foreign Investors" by Dr Atiur Rahman, Governor of Bangladesh Bank. <http://nation.ittefaq.com/issues/2010/02/21/news0436.htm>

Bangladesh Worst Utiliser Of Jica Aid

Finance Minister AMA Muhith felt embarrassed yesterday when a high official of the Japan government pointed out that Bangladesh is the worst utilizer of Japanese aid among the South Asian countries. "I was a bit embarrassed by his remark. The official said our annual utilization of the aid money has plunged to the lowest in South Asia," the finance minister told journalists in his Bangladesh Secretariat office yesterday afternoon following a meeting with Director General of Japan International Cooperation Agency (Jica) Masataka Nakahara in the morning. The finance minister said lately Bangladesh has been utilizing only six percent of Japan's annual commitment of loans and grants. The issue was also discussed in the recently concluded Bangladesh Development Forum, Muhith said adding that it is a shame that the country is not being able to utilize the foreign assistance it is getting. He said Japan is Bangladesh's largest bilateral donor, and the third largest among both multilateral and bilateral donors right after the World Bank, and Asian Development Bank. He also said, "I like Japan a lot. When I was a government secretary back in 1981, even then Japan was our largest donor." Replying to journalists' queries Muhith said he will soon hold meetings with the ministries concerned about the projects financed by Japan, to ensure quick utilization of Japanese fund. Asked whether Japan has any resentment since although it provides the largest amount of bilateral assistance, contracts for most of the development projects go to Chinese companies, the finance minister said, "They might have some resentments, but they surely would not

express that to us."Japanese companies do not get work orders since in most cases their quotations are high, Muhith elaborated.Japan did not get the contract for constructing Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge, but it still agreed to provide assistance for constructing Padma Bridge, he said.Japan is one of the major international donors who agreed to finance the construction.Japan however told the Bangladesh government that pre-qualification criteria for selection of bidders for Padma Bridge construction should be competitive, so the situation does not turn out to be that only one company ends up bidding for the job, Muhith added.

Bhel Installs 120 Mw Gas Turbine Unit In Bangladesh

It is reported that the 120 MW gas turbine generating unit at Siddhirganj Power Plant in Bangladesh set up by Bharat Heavy Electricals was inaugurated by Mr Sheikh Hasina PM, Government of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh.This is the first unit of the prestigious 240 MW Siddhirganj Peaking Power Plant Project being set up by BHEL on turnkey basis. The second unit is also in an advanced stage of completion at the Asian Development Bank funded project of the Electricity Generation Company of Bangladesh.

BHEL has earlier set up the 100 MW Baghabari Power Plant in Bangladesh which has been operating successfully for almost a decade. The commissioning of this 120 MW unit at Siddhirganj Power Plant marks another milestone in further strengthening India Bangladesh trade and economic relations.Electricity generated by the Siddhirganj power plant will provide the much needed addition to the installed power generating capacity of Bangladesh. For the project, the scope of work awarded to BHEL by EGCB, Bangladesh includes complete design, manufacture, testing, supply, installation and commissioning of 2 numbers 126 MW ISO rated Gas Turbines and Generators along with auxiliaries and Gas Booster Compressors, besides other major equipment and civil works.Major equipment like gas turbines, generators, gas booster compressors, generator transformers as well as state of the art control systems were manufactured by BHEL at their various plants in India. For the civil as well as erection commissioning and other local works, local companies in Bangladesh were associated.Bangladesh has been a key export territory of BHEL, where in the past, it has successfully executed several contracts including the 100 MW Baghabari Gas Turbine Power Plant; 230 kV Baghabari Substation and extension of the existing 230 kV Ishurdi Substation, besides supply of Power Transformers, HT Motors and Oilfield equipment to various industries in Bangladesh.BHEL has a rich and varied experience of supplying and installing over 1, 00,000 MW of power plant equipment and has established its footprints in all the six continents of the world, spanning over 70 countries. BHEL's technical competence has earned worldwide acclaim and the company is taking long strides to become a major global player by further enhancing its presence in international markets.

BHUTAN

BHEL Bags Rs 1,000 Cr Order From Bhutan

India's state-run BHEL Feb 8 said it has bagged a Rs 1,000-crore contract for supplying equipment to a hydro power project in Bhutan. Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd (BHEL) has secured a Rs 1,016-crore contract from Punatsangchhu Hydroelectric Project Authority, Bhutan for the electro-mechanical equipment package for a 1,200 MW (6x200 MW) hydroelectric project, a company statement said on Feb 8. The order envisages manufacture, supply, erection and commissioning of the electro-mechanical equipment for the 1,200-MW Punatsangchhu-I Hydroelectric project, it said. (PTI)

India, Nepal agree to ensure South Asian connectivity

Posted On: 18-Feb-2010ew Delhi: After the recent agreement with Bangladesh to ensure connectivity in South Asia on the eastern side, India took another such initiative with Nepal. During the visit of the President of Nepal, Dr Ram Baran Yadav to India a new air services agreement was signed between the two countries on February 16. A Memorandum of Understanding was also signed between the two countries for railway infrastructure development at five border points along Nepal-India border. Another MoU was signed for development of Nepal Bharat Maitri Polytechnic at Hetauda in Makwanpur district in Nepal. MoU for establishment of Nepal Bharat Maitri Sabha Griha in Birgunj was also signed. Earlier India and Bangladesh had agreed that Rohanpur-Singabad broad gauge railway link would be available for transit to Nepal. Bangladesh has planned to convert Radhikapur-Birol railway line into broad gauge for railway transit link to Bhutan. India has announced a line of credit of US\$ one billion to Bangladesh for a range of projects, including railway infrastructure, supply of BG locomotives and passenger coaches, rehabilitation of Saidpur workshop, procurement of buses including articulate buses and dredging projects. India has agreed to consider the request for assistance to construct road infrastructure in Dhaka. Bangladesh has asked India to construct a flyover across Tin Bigha Corridor for exclusive use by India as agreed earlier.

For facilitating trade, Ashuganj in Bangladesh and Silghat in India will be declared as "ports of call." A joint team will assess the improvement of infrastructure and the cost for one-time or longer term transportation of over dimensional cargo from Ashuganj. India will make necessary investment. Bangladesh has agreed to allow the use of Monga and Chittagong sea ports for movement of goods to and from India through road and rail. Bangladesh would give access to these two ports also to Nepal and Bhutan. Trucks from Bhutan and Nepal will be allowed to enter about 200 meters into zero-point at Banglabandh-Phulbari land customs station – a decision which would ensure South Asian connectivity on the eastern side. For facilitating the movement of the people of both the countries, it was agreed to start the Maitree Express between Kolkata and Dhaka. The construction of the proposed Akhaura-Agartala railway link will be financed by grant from India. India and Bangladesh had agreed to operationalise land customs stations at Sabroom-Ramgarh and Demagiri-Thegamukh and strengthen the infrastructure of both

new and existing land customs stations. It was agreed to set up border haats on pilot basis at select points, including that on Meghalaya border – which would ensure connectivity to the remote northeastern India. The leaders in the South Asian region are gradually feeling the growing need for connectivity and people-to-people movement. A beginning is being made in the eastern part of South Asia with India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan committing to work together. There is also a need for South Asian leaders to ensure that the region remain free from any terrorist activity as this would ensure peace and security for the people in the region. Good neighbourly relations between countries in the region is the need of the hour.

Bhutan to offer zero-tariff benefit

Bhutan is going to provide duty free access to all goods from Bangladesh, says International Business Forum of Bangladesh (IBFB) in a statement yesterday. Khandu Wangchuk, Bhutanese minister for economic affairs, made the announcement during a meeting with the business delegation from Bangladesh recently. During the meeting, the minister said that virtually all products imported from Bangladesh would receive duty free access to the Kingdom of Bhutan. “Bhutan will soon enact economic development policies soon in which it will also spell out incentives for all separate sectors like hydropower, tourism and construction.” Bangladesh and Bhutan has a very close relationship and can be further strengthened by increasing trade between the two countries, he said. Mahmudul Islam Chowdhury, president of IBFB, led the delegation. Bhutan also assured the delegation of considering imports of more items from Bangladesh. Among others, Desho Bapkesang, ambassador of Bhutan to Bangladesh, ATM Saidul Alam, vice president of IBFB, Chowdhury Musharraf Hossain and Dr Khalid Hassan, directors of IBFB, were also present at the meeting.

IRMA placements a big hit, salaries up 20%

Dollar salaries don't ring too many bells here. An overseas posting could mean the challenge of starting a one-teacher school in a remote Bhutanese village; and Day Zero is the day when you manage to recoup the first Rs 100 you shelled out by way of a micro finance loan to a poor farmer in Warangal. Yet this is a campus placement, and this too is a B-school. The placement season here coincides with a larger-than-life version of what's currently taking place in the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, barely 100 km away. Welcome to the world of the Institute of Rural Management, Anand (IRMA), a B-school that's high in demand as state administrations, micro-finance institutions and educational institutions realise that the developmental process in India doesn't lack money, it's just awfully short of capable hands that can manage it. A week ago, on the very first day of its campus placement season IRMA managed to place all its students of the 2010 batch. Sure, no bulge-bracket figures here, the average salary stood at Rs 6 lakh per annum, 20% higher than last year's. But each of the 65 students received more than two job offers. And among the top recruiters were the tribal welfare divisions of the state governments and organisations involved in livelihood projects with names like Hole-In-The-Wall and Basix. IRMA managed this despite the absence of banks, both public and private sector, that usually recruit around 50% of the students every year. Placement coordinator professor Saswata Narayan Biswas says over 45 organisations approached IRMA this year, of

which 19 were invited to the campus. So what explains this rush at a campus devoted to management at the grassroot level? Magsaysay winner and IRMA board member Deep Joshi says that the institute scores because the Indian education system fails to encourage students to work in rural areas. "Funding is no more a problem in the past 10 years or so with the Centre promoting schemes like NREG. However, the development sector lacks talented and knowledgeable people who can work in rural India and guide people to utilise their funds in an appropriate manner," he says. At Placements 2010, Hyderabad-based livelihood organisation Basix picked up the highest number — 12 students. "Former IRMA candidates have not only grown with Basix but have also started their own initiatives. We will deploy the students in all the functional areas as management trainees for a couple of years. They will work in consulting, agriculture, energy, climate change, IT and HR," says Rama Kadamb, who heads leadership development at Basix, which operates in 12 states. Hole-in-the-Wall, an organisation working on education through learning stations, recruited two students to be placed in Bhutan for project work. The Andhra Pradesh government wants to engage the IRMA students it picked up in its tribal welfare department while the Gujarat government has recruited for its Development Support Agency and Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority. Madhya Pradesh roped in an IRMA student for a World Bank project. Out of 65, over 25 students were placed with the state governments while organisations engaged in microfinance and livelihood projects recruited 30, says Mr Biswas. Among others, headhunters from traditional placement participants Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (Amul) and National Dairy Development Board recruited nine students while ITC picked up three for its e-Chaupal. IRMA, set up in 1979 by India's milkman Verghese Kurien, has enlisted over 650 organisations, which can participate in the placement process. "Placements for 2010 has once again proved the faith of organisations engaged with microfinance and livelihood activities in IRMA by recruiting students in a big way," says IRMA director Vivek Bhandari

To promote array of products through travel trade fairs

Tourism Council of Bhutan aims to attract high-end Indian travelers

Bhutan – The land of Thunder Dragon is now turning its focus on the Indian market and aiming to attract high-end travellers. Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB) is now looking at participating at major travel fairs and exhibitions in India to increase its visibility and interaction with the travel trade. TCB is going to highlight tourism products like culture, adventure, community, wildlife, eco, rural and butterfly tours among Indian travellers.

Talking exclusively to *TravelBiz Monitor*, Tashi Payden Tshering, Marketing Officer, Tourism Council of Bhutan said, "Due to the slump recorded last year, TCB is now focusing on emerging and potential tourist markets for Bhutan. India and China tops the list of potential tourism markets due to low impact of recession and close proximity with Bhutan. We already receive good amount of Indian travellers without any marketing efforts. But from this year, we want to establish our presence in India through participating at trade shows like SATTE and OTM

4 SC justices to be named tomorrow

The names of the four justices of Bhutan's first Supreme Court will be announced tomorrow. The royal commission chairman, Chief Justice-designate Lyonpo Sonam Tobgay, said that he would announce the names of the candidates at the Thimphu high court, where all members of the judiciary and royal commission will gather. The formation of the Supreme Court will finally be complete with His Majesty conferring dakyen on the Chief Justice and four justices of the Supreme Court. The seven-member royal commission began their search for justices in the first week of January this year. They had submitted a list of candidates, including senior and young judges. With the formation of the first Supreme Court, a national judicial commission will be formed to recommend justices of the High Court. The High Court, which is being manned by one judge today, is supposed to have nine justices, including the Chief Justice of the High Court.

Cabinet approves 1,000-acre land

To be used as an equity grant by DHI in its joint venture to develop a knowledge city
Knowledge City 18 February, 2010 - The cabinet on Tuesday approved a grant of about 1,000 acres of land to Druk holding and investments (DHI) to be used as an equity in the proposal to build a knowledge city in Bhutan with partners from outside. The land will enable DHI to partner in the project, the cost of which is expected to run into billions of ngultrums. Cabinet ministers agreed that Bhutan must do its best to attract outside investment by creating a conducive environment within the country. The economies of most countries, they said, were driven by foreign direct investment (FDI) and Bhutan must revise its FDI policy sooner to make it investor-friendly, and not handle them on a case by case basis. Cabinet ministers also agreed that Bhutan must finalise its economic development policy as soon as possible and possibly come up with an FDI-friendly policy. "Without FDI, we can't develop," said Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba. It was spelt out that the education city was in sync with the country's education policies, thus the need to expedite the process. Infinity earlier proposed to invest one billion dollars for the education city. "The size of the project is huge and DHI wouldn't be able to partner with Infinity without using the land as their equity," said the prime minister. The project, by far the largest FDI investment proposal, aims to bring in 15 to 30 top universities, along with 40,000 foreign students, into the 1000-acre education city. The Infinity group chairman, Ravindra Chamaria, presented a 'package proposal' designed for a similar project in India. "If we dilly-dally, investors will lose their interest," said the prime minister, while another minister pointed out that not having a stable policy is "hazardous". "If we don't put land, we have to put money," said Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba. "Using land is the cheapest and the most logical thing to do." However, the location of the project is not finalised. A proposed location in Phobjikha was shot down and REC was directed to explore the location in Wang Sisina, Thimphu, where it surveyed to establish a university. The revenue for the project is expected to come through developing and leasing various educational facilities to universities or companies. "Bhutan has the right environment for such a project because of its political stability and pristine environment," said Tenzin Rigden from the prime minister's office during a press briefing. Although the government has approved the land, it has instructed DHI to do further studies. Education minister, Lyonpo Thakur Singh Powdyel, called education city a fascinating development

within Bhutan. On the benefits of the having such a hub, he said, Bhutan will be winning the lion's share. "We've been talking about Bhutan becoming a knowledge hub and this is an area in which Bhutan could capitalise," he said. The minister said with a world-class centre in Bhutan, the country will have branches of world-class universities and colleges right within our own territory. "They'll bring in examples of good practices. We'll stand to gain in terms of our being able to participate in the intellectual exploration these institutions are known for," he said. "We'll also benefit through job creation that Infinity will make possible. We also feel that our national intellectual profile will be enhanced. The coming of Infinity and a number of world-class colleges and institutions will be a wonderful investment." Infinity first formally brought up the proposal to the government in a meeting in June 2009 with the ministry of economic affairs and later the ministry of education. The chairperson of a committee formed to look into the project, economic affairs secretary, Dasho Sonam Tshering, said a task force was formed to look into the project. He said that the task force is looking into a clear mechanism of bidding procedures. "As far as the task force is concerned, we'll work out a clear procedure, based on which we'll let interested groups participate," said the secretary. He said that he was unaware of the cabinet's decision. "The education itself is looking into the kind of system to follow," the secretary said. "REC and the education ministry is working on an education guideline."

Why can't the chicken cross the street?

Because of the BAFRA ban!

Poultry Import Ban 19 February, 2010 - The ban on import of poultry and poultry products imposed last month has not stopped people from bringing in poultry products from the Indian border town, Jaigaon, where eggs and chicken are still available. Bhutan banned the import of poultry and poultry products routed through the neighbouring Indian state of West Bengal (WB), following an outbreak of avian influenza (H5N1) or bird flu in Murshidabad district of WB. Phuentsholing is the main entry point for poultry and poultry products, which are distributed across the country. Since the ban was imposed last month, no disinfection procedures are being carried out at the gate. Residents say that still there is no strict monitoring at the moment. Except for a few shabbily dressed people carrying big bags being frisked sometimes, not much seems to be happening, they say. "They just question what we carry in our bags," said one resident. A vendor selling live chicken and eggs in the Chinese line in Jaigaon said many Bhutanese still buy chicken and eggs. "They put it inside plastic bags and cover it with other things," he said. Meat vendors also offer the option of throwing the meat over the boundary wall that separates Bhutan and India. "The chicken can be over the wall if you wait on the other side. We've tried this before," he said. A few Indian vendors also deliver chicken in bulk at the doorstep, including livestock products that are currently banned. But they refused to share their modus operandi. The BAFRA officer in-charge in the border town, Ugyen Dorji, said that constant monitoring is being done. "We haven't yet received any instruction from the ministry on the implementation of disinfection procedures at the gate," he said. Although no mass seizures were made, BAFRA officials said that there have been small seizures and penalties imposed on a daily basis. "There are cases where people bring in for self

consumption,” said Ugyen Dorji. “We have shortage of staff but, with the help of police, customs and immigration officials, we’re monitoring.” There are seven permanent staff and seven on a temporary basis, according to BAFRA officials. BAFRA officials said that eggs and frozen chicken were mostly imported from the two southern Indian states - Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh - and routed through West Bengal. Imports from Nepal and Bangladesh, however, mainly comprised eggs and day old chicks (DOCs) that were mostly airlifted. Agriculture officials said that the earlier ban on poultry feed has been lifted. All in-country transport of DOCs, poultry and table/hatching eggs via West Bengal is allowed. “The in-country products shall be allowed, provided that packing and sealing of the consignment are done at the farm of origin in the presence of the Bhutan agriculture food and regulatory authority (BAFRA) personnel and opened at the destination in the presence of BAFRA officials,” states the notification. Bhutan has enforced bans on the import of poultry products several times since the bird flu first hit South-East Asia in 2004. Meanwhile, officials from health, agriculture and economic affairs ministry attended a multi-sectoral meeting on bird flu risk assessment in West Bengal for about two weeks and discussed various recommendations, according to agriculture ministry officials. The need for a cadastral and geographical map of high risks areas in the four southern dzongkhags - Samtse, Chukha, Sarpang and Samdrupjongkhar - along with the poultry population and relevant information to plan out and ease culling operations, in case of future outbreak, was one of the recommendations. The need for concerned agencies to bring in a few relevant amendments in the present bird flu emergency preparedness plan was also recommended. They also discussed if there was a necessity for emergency transport of poultry products to Bhutan from bio-security and trade point of view. “It was also decided that the trade department would monitor prices of poultry and poultry products, if prices escalate,” according to a press release from the agriculture ministry.

BHUTAN:

Improbable Partners Aim to Bring Biotechnology to a Himalayan Kingdom

British mycologist Nigel Hywel-Jones is serving as an adviser to Bhutan Pharmaceuticals Private Ltd., a company founded by local entrepreneur Wangdi Jamyang. Besides prospecting for fungi that attack insects and culturing isolates that may have medicinal value, Hywel-Jones is crafting a business model for biotech in the kingdom. There is no dearth of raw materials. Bhutan's highlands are a prime habitat for at least one prized commodity: an insect fungus, *Cordyceps sinensis*, that fetches outrageous prices as a Chinese medicine. Hywel-Jones believes that Bhutan, a biodiversity hot spot, may harbor a wealth of novel compounds for Western medicine, too. But the duo insists that they are not embarking on a biological Gold Rush. Wangdi emphasizes that their activities will be guided by a Buddhist reverence for the environment enshrined in Bhutan's 2008 constitution, which calls for preserving 65% of the country as forest.

Japan grant to strengthen Paro riverbanks

The government of Japan is providing a grant of USD \$ 91,867 to reinforce the banks of Duchu and Pachu river in Paro that were seriously damaged in May last year by floods caused by Cyclone Aila. Bhutan's ambassador to India, V. Namgyel and the ambassador

of Japan to Bhutan, Hideaki Domichi, signed the grant agreement project - (River Training Works at Hungrel, Paro Dzongkhag) - at the Embassy of Japan in New Delhi, on February 18, 2010. The project will benefit more than 2,000 people in Hungrel gewog by protecting agricultural land, houses and temples located below the damaged riverbanks. It will also contribute to the government's efforts to rebuild damages caused by the floods last year. At the signing ceremony Ambassador V. Namgyel thanked the Government of Japan for the grant, which is part of the USD \$ 2 million commitment made by the government of Japan to rebuild damages by the Cyclone Aila.

Education,

Labour

checklists

The education and labour ministries signed performance compacts with the prime minister yesterday on 17 key initiatives to be undertaken by 2013, which will bind them to their targets. The education ministry committed to raise the percentage of teachers satisfied with the profession from 24 in 2009 to 70 percent in 2013 through changes in compensation, career tracks and promotion systems. With the initiative geared towards a Bhutanese learning system focused on GNH principles, education minister, Lyonpo Thakur S Powdyel, said the morale, motivation and commitment level of teachers would increase. "In time, our teachers will see the big reason for being in education and find fulfillment in what they're doing," he said. The ministry also committed to create innovative technology-based teacher support mechanisms, especially for remote locations as one of the 10 key commitments the ministry signed yesterday. Education officials said they would develop an e-portal forum for teachers to discuss best practices, module lessons and various other topics on the internet. Plans are also set for a call centre for remote teachers to enhance communication with other officials in the ministry. Education ministry will ensure that teacher supply effectively meets teacher demand by 2013. Bhutan, today, faces a teacher crunch of about 1,000. The ministry has committed to achieve 100 percent net enrolment for primary education and 75 percent for secondary education by the end of the 10th Plan. The minister said: "We're committing the whole machinery of the education ministry to be more vigorously and seriously engaged in the service of the children and people of the country." Meanwhile, the labour ministry has committed to increase the annual number of vocational education and training (VET) graduates from 500 in 2009 to 6,000 by 2013. That is almost 30 percent of class X and XII students, who appear the board examination annually. Labour minister, Lyonpo Dorji Wangdi, said they signed seven initiatives relating to creating a skilled workforce through vocational education and training. He said that, in the next five years, the ministry would need to provide jobs to about 75,000 youth. Of which, the government has mandated, through this compact, that about 50,000 jobs should be provided through VET. To attract students to pursue VET, the institutes will offer viable courses to meet employers' demands, introduce curriculum on competency-based training and increase the VET's attractiveness. "We'll do that by putting a minimum wage rate policy and offering opportunities to pursue diploma and degree courses after VET," Lyonpo Dorji Wangdi said. The ministry will also reduce the government funding for each student to Nu 85,000 a year from existing Nu 92,000. The ministry will also increase the employability of these technical graduates from 50 to 80 percent by 2013. "With curriculum and training delivery system of vocational training institutes undergoing several transformation, we'll achieve the targets," Lyonpo Dorji Wangdi said. The first performance compacts were

signed between the prime minister, information and communication ministry, health ministry and tourism council of Bhutan in December 2009. The education and labour ministers said that this compact required them to make a commitment to deliver the target to both the prime minister and the people of the country. "The performance compact is a new accountability system and we're fully aware of what we're committing to," the labour minister said.

Nailing our happiness colours to the wall

Happiness. Love. For most of us these are all lovely notions, floating in balloons of abstraction in the stratosphere; limited to art more than science. Measuring these things looks like too hard basket material. But more and more that's exactly what we try to do. We want to know who is happier? When are we happier? Just when this is about to give us a headache, social media comes once again to save the day. The US National Happiness Index, landed on the shores of Facebook, will let us know for certain the peaks and troughs of positivity and could be a new frontier in "happiness science". It analyses anonymously the words used by US users in Facebook status updates and assesses their positivity and negativity, giving us a pretty graph of how the US is feeling on any given day. The Facebook data team is even using the index to assess *who* is happier. After Valentine's day, the team analysed questions of love, including whether people in relationships are more likely to be positive. According to Facebook, the result, sadly enough for those lonely hearts, is that those partnered up are generally more happy, and those in a marriage are even happier than those simply "in a relationship". Curiously those in "open relationships" - whatever that means - are the least happy of all, sadder than even those who list themselves as widowed or "it's complicated". If you don't disclose your relationship status at all, then heaven help you

The science of happiness is actually an already established field. In economics and social research there have long been efforts to quantify and qualify our feelings. In Bhutan there is even a Gross National Happiness Movement, a philosophy and policy hybrid where the king and the Bhutanese government keep an eye on a gross national happiness index (as opposed to gross domestic product). The Bhutanese know that to improve national happiness you need to know how to measure it. To a scientist of happiness, Facebook updates are a wet dream of data with 100 million posted words a day. One can analyse these to find who, where and when and how we are feeling. The creator of the index, Adam Kramer, a social psychology student at the University of Oregon (who happens to be 72 percent happier than the average American Facebook user) explains on his blog; "every day, through Facebook status updates, people share how they feel with those who matter most in their lives. These updates are tiny windows into how people are doing." From this angle it looks like social media could be the brave new frontier of the science of happiness.

But there might be a few problems with using this kind of social networking data to assess "happiness". First, data sourced from status updates may well overstate positivity. Our Facebook updates, because of their semi-public nature, may prompt us to appear happier than we might otherwise be; a Facebook face to meet the faces that you meet if you will. Apologies to T.S Eliot there. The other issue is that not everyone uses their Facebook updates to actually say how they are feeling at that very moment. Status updates can also simply be links to other things in the news or quotes from somewhere

else. A user, also a hip hop fan, may well pick out lyrics and use that as an update. For example Busta Rhymes' lyric: "Break ya f*ckin neck b*tches" as an update is seemingly negative but this could well be our user appreciating the Brooklyn rapper's confrontational style. Anyway, said user may be in enough trouble having committed one of the cardinal sins of Facebook - lyric updating. Another issue might be categorising words as positive or negative. A few example of words used in the Facebook happiness index were "yay" and "awesome" for the positive indicators and "sad" and "tragic" for negative. But words depend on context not understood by a computer anonymously searching for terms. A word like "tragic", deemed to be an "unhappy" word, could be used in the context of Bill " is a Depeche Mode tragic" - not necessarily a negative thing. Or the word "yay" could easily be used in the context of Bill "has to go to work today. yay." Sarcasm underlies an unhappy day of work for Bill there. But it is interesting to reflect on why we want to measure happiness in the first place. This index is a part of a wider trend among social researchers, economist and the Bhutanese, to nail our happiness colours to the wall. We want more and more to quantify, qualify, compare and even attribute a dollar value to abstractions like happiness. Why we are happy? When we are happy? Who is the happiest? It might be wise to remember that the analysed life is not always the happiest one.

MALDIVES

Bhel pares early losses

At the day's low of Rs 2341.30, the stock had declined 1.37% earlier in the day.

Meanwhile, the BSE Sensex was down 135.70 points, or 0.83% to 16,192.14.

On BSE, 46,467 shares were traded in the counter as against an average daily volume of 1.06 lakh shares in the past one quarter. The stock hit a high of Rs 2368.50 and a low of Rs 2341.30 so far during the day. The stock had hit a 52-week high of Rs 2550 on 17 October 2009 and a 52-week low of Rs 1251 on 6 March 2009. The large-cap stock had outperformed the market over the past one month till 18 February 2010, declining 0.12% as compared to the Sensex's 7.44% fall. It had also outperformed the market in the past one quarter, gaining 4.33% as compared to the Sensex's decline of 3.95%. The company's equity capital is Rs 489.52. Face value per share is Rs 10. The current price of Rs 2361 discounts the company's Q3 December 2009 annualized EPS of Rs 87.64, by a PE multiple of 26.94. Last week, Bharat Heavy Electricals (Bhel) secured a contract worth Rs 1016 crore to build a 1,200 megawatts hydro power plant in Bhutan. Bhel's net profit rose 35.7% to Rs 1072.59 crore on a 17.9% increase in sales to Rs 7100.34 crore in Q3 December 2009 over Q3 December 2008. Bhel is engaged in manufacturing and distributing electrical, electronic, mechanical and nuclear power equipment. The Government of India owns 67.72% stake in Bhel (as on 31 December 2009).

Pakistan offers agri products to Maldives

Pakistan on Saturday offered all-out support to the government of Maldives in their agriculture development and capacity-building and would offer their student agriculture-related short courses and other programmes. The Federal Minister for Food and Agriculture, Nazar Muhammad Gondal, in a meeting with Maldives High Commissioner, Shehenaz Adam directed that proposal drafts about the potential areas for trade must be exchanged between the two countries so that a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)

could be worked out and signed in the near future. She showed keen interest in the export of rice, fruits, garments and other agriculture-related items to her country. The High Commissioner added that Maldives imports almost everything from abroad and Pakistan's help in this regard would be most appreciated. Maldives is a small country with a population of 300,000 and 50 per cent of its GDP is earned through the tourism industry. It imports almost everything from abroad and its local production is almost zero. There is no university in Maldives and the country depends on self-sponsored and foreign-assisted scholarships and training courses.

Karzai-Taliban Peace Talks... in the Maldives?

I read The Times' piece about Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar's arrest and kept getting tripped up by all the Pakistani officials quoted and paraphrased in a state of outrage that they weren't invited to any negotiations with the Taliban. ("On the one hand, the Americans don't want us to negotiate directly with the Taliban, but then we hear that they are doing it themselves without telling us," a senior Pakistani intelligence official told reporters Carlotta Gall and Souad Mekhennet.) And I thought to myself, "What negotiations?" As it turns out, AFP may have an answer. According to the wire service, representatives from the Karzai government and the Taliban met last month in the Maldives at a "holiday resort" to discuss terms. President Hamid Karzai's envoys met with at least seven members closely connected to the Taliban to discuss national reconciliation ahead of the January 28 London meeting of world powers to discuss Afghanistan. "The meeting took place at the Bandos resort island, but the Maldivian government was not directly involved in the discussions," a source close to the Maldivian administration told AFP, asking not to be named. That's a pretty detailed account, although "detailed" isn't the same thing as "true." There's no further detail, though, on what specifically was discussed or what the alleged talks yielded. It's also not exactly the same account that Pakistani official gave to Gall and Mekhennet, since the official suggested the U.S. negotiated with the Taliban — which is unreported and may be wrong — but this is at least in the ballpark. And it also follows a pattern of alleged Karzai-Taliban talks that go nowhere and which the Taliban deny ever took place

Jumeirah expands presence in the Maldives

Jumeirah Group has signed an agreement with Xanadu Holdings Private Limited to manage Jumeirah Meradhoo, a new five star deluxe resort located in Gaafu Alifu Atoll, south of the Male Atoll. This is the second phase of the Group's expansion strategy in an area which is recognized as the world's top luxury resort destination. The 36-villa resort is located on an uninhabited island of 45,000m² with 16 of the villas forming a unique 'water village' separated from the main island by 1km of coral reef, providing guests with an exclusive 'two resort' island. Each of the 'water village' villas will measure a spacious 240sqm while the 20 luxury beach villas on the main island will be approximately 300sqm in size. Jumeirah Meradhoo will also feature a dive centre, offering guests access to one of the best reefs in the Maldives; three restaurants and a bar, and a Talise spa. The resort will complement Jumeirah Maldives, the Group's other development in the

Maldives, which also offers a selection of water and beach villas, three restaurants and a bar, a Talise spa, and a dive centre. With these two distinctive properties, Jumeirah will be able to cater to guests looking for an exclusive retreat over two islands. The proximity of Jumeirah Maldives to Malé International Airport will be beneficial to guests of both resorts as the Group plans to develop innovative combination packages. Jumeirah Meradhoo is the second management agreement signed by the Group in the Maldives and brings the total number of properties under development or in operation by Jumeirah globally to 42. http://www.4hoteliers.com/4hots_nshw.php?mwi=6972

Maldives to phase out polluting chemicals 20 years early

IANAS, Feb 17, MALÉ: The Maldives has pledged to phase out by 2020 a group of chemicals which thin out the earth's ozone layer and warm the atmosphere, according to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). The phase-out will be 20 years ahead of what all countries have to do under an international protocol. Hailing the decision to phase out hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), a UNEP spokesperson said here Wednesday that it was in line with the country's pledge to go carbon neutral by 2020 to help battle climate change. A number of scientists has warned that if nothing is done to reduce global carbon emissions, the archipelago that makes up the Maldives will soon sink beneath the rising sea.

Announcing the decision, President Mohamed Nasheed said: "You cannot cut a deal with mother nature. And we don't intend to try. This is why, in March 2009, the Maldives announced plans to become the first carbon neutral country in the world." "I believe in mankind's infinite capacity for innovation and change. New technologies allow us to both develop and maintain a healthy environment. Countries, and companies, that choose to lead this change, will be the winners of this century. We are not part of the problem, but we would like to part of the solution by deploying innovative technologies and policies," he added. HCFCs and their cousins, HFCs, were created in the 1980s as substitutes for chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) for use in refrigeration, including air-conditioning units, refrigerators and a wide variety of manufacturing processes. HCFCs not only destroy the stratospheric ozone layer which is essential to life on Earth but also contributes to climate change. In 2007, the international community decided phase out HCFCs by 2040, as part of the Montreal Protocol meant to protect the ozone layer. In the Maldives, HCFCs are used in nearly 100 tourist resorts spread over more than 1,000 islands. "Our decision to phase out HCFCs and our declaration to go carbon neutral by 2020 will demonstrate to the world our determination to save the planet for humanity. Small island states can also be at the frontline in the battle to save the planet," said Minister of Housing, Transport and Environment Mohamed Aslam.

PM greets Maldives President on National Day ISLAMABAD,

Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani has sent a message of greetings to the President of the Republic of Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, on their National Day falling on 1st Rabi-ul-Awwal, 16th February, 2010. **In his message, the Prime Minister said that "I feel greatly pleased to convey on behalf of the government, the people of Pakistan and on my own behalf our warmest felicitations on the national day of the Republic of Maldives". "Our two countries traditionally enjoy close and cooperative relationship. I am**

confident that Pakistan and Maldives would continue to work closely to further cement the wide ranging ties for mutual benefit of our two people”, he added

.Pakistan to help for the capacity building of Maldives in agriculture sector,

ISLAMABAD: Federal Minister for Food and Agriculture, Nazar Muhammad Gondal has said that his ministry is ready for building institutional linkages with the Maldives’ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and assisting the people of Maldives in building their capacity in agriculture. He said this while talking to Maldives High Commissioner Shehenaz Adam here at his office on Saturday, according to press statement issued here. He said that the students from that country would be offered short courses and other programmes. Gondal said that his ministry would work on exporting Halal meat, rice, fruits like mangoes, kenos, etc. He directed that proposal drafts about the potential areas for trade must be exchanged between the two countries so that a MoU could be worked out and signed in near future.

The minister also added that the Maldives Minister for Agriculture & Fisheries would be sent an official invitation to visit Pakistan and identify the areas where Pakistan can help and assist Maldives.

Maldives High Commissioner Shehenaz Adam on the occasion showed keen interest in the export of rice, fruits (especially mangoes and kenos), garments and other agriculture related items to her country. The High Commissioner added that Maldives imports all most every thing from abroad and Pakistan’s help in this regard would be most appreciated.

The Federal Minister said that Pakistan produces about 4 million tons of surplus rice and the best quality of Basmati in the world is a production of the country, which could be exported to Maldives. The High Commissioner thanked the federal minister’s for his cordial and positive response to the Maldives’ request for cooperation in the field of agriculture and showing interest in the export to Maldives. The Federal minister presented the traditional Sindhi Ajrak to the visiting guest and thanked her for her for the productive visit. Maldives is a small country of 300 thousands only and 50% of its GDP is earned through the tourism industry. It imports all most everything from abroad and its local production is almost zero. There is no university in Maldives and the country depends on self-sponsored and foreign assisted scholarships and training courses

How will the Maldives fight climate change?

REUTERS, Feb 20, 2010, SINGAPORE: The Maldives, which fears being swamped by rising seas as the planet heats up, says major economies should toughen their curbs of greenhouse gas emissions blamed for causing global warming. The chain of low-lying sandy islands in the Indian Ocean, famed for its diving and luxury resorts, has launched a plan to become carbon neutral by 2020 with the help of renewable energy such as wind and solar that it hopes will attract foreign funds. Following are answers to questions put to President Mohamed Nasheed in an e-mail interview. Nasheed was among the most outspoken leaders at December’s U.N. climate

talks in Copenhagen, calling for swift action to fight global warming.
CAN THE MALDIVES BE SAVED ?

"My country is in peril but I don't accept that we are doomed. If the world unites against carbon pollution and embraces green development, we can bring the climate crisis under control."By the end of this century, the very worst-case sea level rise predicted by scientists is two metres. And that's if all our efforts fail. If we handle the situation better, it will be less than a metre."We can adapt to some of this change, even if parts or whole islands have to be evacuated. Every country stands to lose if we don't curb carbon pollution. So, in a sense, we are all Maldivians."

WHAT WILL IT COST TO BECOME CARBON NEUTRAL? ONE ESTIMATE IS \$1.1 BILLION FOR THE COUNTRY'S 310,000 PEOPLE

"No-one said this would be cheap or easy. It already costs us a great deal to import oil, which is used to generate all our electricity -- \$300,000 per day, with oil at \$50 a barrel. If oil prices rise over \$100 a barrel, the carbon neutral plan will save us money because we will no longer have to burn money on oil. "We are incentivising the private sector to make many of the necessary infrastructure investments. For private companies, investing in renewable energy, waste-to-energy plants or energy efficiency schemes will generate healthy returns over decades." "But wind and solar are intermittent by definition. So backup is essential -- and this is a big challenge. If we go for biomass then it must be from truly sustainable sources. If in the worst-case, our existing diesel generators are used as back up, then we would have to offset the pollution they cause."

HOW MUCH ARE TOURISTS WILLING TO PAY AS AN EXTRA TAX?

"We do not currently have any plans for a green tourist tax. If we can demonstrate that achieving carbon neutrality is not only possible, but also profitable, I think bigger countries will follow suit and we can make real progress on curbing global carbon pollution."

DO YOU THINK THE COPENHAGEN ACCORD WILL EVENTUALLY BECOME THE BASIS OF A NEW LEGALLY BINDING CLIMATE TREATY?

"It's too early to say, but clearly the signs are not good on the legally binding aspect. In any case, we should get a treaty right before making it legally binding. Kyoto was legally binding, but it did very little to reduce emissions, and actually made some problems worse with all its complexities and its rigid divisions between developed and developing countries. "The Maldives made huge efforts at Copenhagen to salvage the best deal possible. I felt that a total collapse would have been the worst outcome. In the event we got an Accord which is far from perfect but is something we can build on."

WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR THE NEXT MAJOR U.N. CLIMATE CONFERENCE IN MEXICO IN NOVEMBER? "My great fear is that an ambitious and binding climate deal is endlessly postponed and climate talks start to resemble trade negotiations -- endless rounds of talks with little progress to show for it at the end. "At Bali, everyone looked forward to Copenhagen. Now after Copenhagen everyone is looking forward to Mexico. We have to stop fooling ourselves that action can wait until tomorrow."

Threatened by rising seas, Maldives moves to go carbon-neutral

The devastating consequences of climate change are already beginning to claim victims. The low-lying island of the Maldives, in the Indian Ocean, is being faced with the looming threat of rising sea levels, a direct effect of global warming. The island's beacon of hope, President Mohamed Nasheed, the Maldives' first democratically elected president in more than 30 years, is the man at the forefront of the climate change movement. Nasheed talks to Metro about how the Maldives is set to become the world's first carbon-neutral nation. What are the biggest environmental threats currently faced by the Maldives? Climate change and the rising sea level are two of our biggest threats. The Maldives is already experiencing unprecedented levels of coastal erosion, threatening people's property. Coastal erosion and seawater intrusion is also polluting groundwater and damaging farm crops. In your opinion, who are the biggest culprits and contributors to climate change. What should we be doing to stop them? I don't want to get into the game of pointing fingers and apportioning blame for climate change. The whole world needs to come together behind a shared vision of low carbon development. Green and renewable technologies now exist to provide every good and service we require and we should make the goal of using them.

How long do you think it will take for the Maldives to become the world's first carbon-neutral nation? We aim to go carbon-neutral in 10 years; which means a 100 per cent net reduction in our carbon dioxide emissions by 2020. We will aim to shift from oil to 100 per cent renewable energy production by using wind farms, solar power and waste-to-energy plants to power the entire country. We have already signed deals with international energy firms to build wind farms in the Maldives. Do you think people should see the Maldives as a victim of climate change or as a symbol of hope? Every single person on this planet will be a victim of climate change unless we act to bring it under control. The Maldives just happens to be at the frontline of this challenge. We may be the first to suffer the consequences, but we will not be the last. What eco projects are being developed in the Maldives? The government is currently working with international energy firms, such as Suzlon, to build wind farms that will reduce the amount of oil we burn to generate electricity. We are working with the government of Japan to install \$10 million worth of photovoltaic solar panels in and around the capital city of Male.

Will you be using natural defenses, such as coral reefs, to save the Maldives? The coral reefs are our natural defenses against the sea — they act as a natural breakwater around every island. Protecting the coral reefs is critically important to prevent erosion and ensure we don't lose all the biodiversity of the sea. Corals are particularly sensitive to rising sea temperatures. If one day you have to find a new plot of land for the Maldives, where do you think you would look? We do not want to leave the Maldives. If the world comes together and tackles carbon pollution, the Maldives has a future in the 22nd century. If we can't save the Maldives today, you can't save London, New York or Hong Kong tomorrow. Nevertheless, it is the government's policy to at least start thinking about the worst-case scenario 100 years down the line and for us; that means moving to dry land elsewhere.

Taliban and Afghan Government held secret talks in the Maldives: report

The islands of the Maldives are used to visitors of the exotic kind - from Russian oligarchs and Hollywood megastars to environmental activists and diving fanatics. But at the end of January, they hosted perhaps their most unusual guests ever during three

days of clandestine peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The meeting at the Bandos island resort was kept secret until yesterday when Muhammed Zuhair, a spokesman for the President of the Maldives, confirmed that it had taken place. He said the Maldivian government was not involved directly in the talks, which took place shortly before an international conference on Afghanistan in London on January 28. Hamid Karzai, the Afghan President, announced at the London meeting that he would call a peace conference with the aim of luring Taliban fighters from the battlefield. The United States has also now approved plans to offer a truce to low and mid-level Taliban fighters, although it remains sceptical of striking deals with the Taliban leadership. An official source in the Maldives told The Times that the talks there were between "some of Mr Karzai's people" and "moderate" Taliban representatives. "It wasn't sponsored by the Maldivian government, but it was done with its knowledge," he said. "Our position is that we'd like to support any peace initiatives." Mr Zuhair said that among the Taliban representatives was the son of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a notorious warlord and former Afghan prime minister. Mr Hekmatyar leads the anti-government Hizb-e-Islami faction, one of the fiercest insurgent groups fighting Nato forces in eastern Afghanistan, but he has also made repeated overtures to Mr Karzai. The Taliban representatives were apparently permitted to travel to the Maldives having been removed from a UN blacklist that froze their assets and imposed a ban on their movements. Mr Zuhair said the government delegation included four Afghan lawmakers and a relative of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the late leader of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Mr Massoud, an ethnic Tajik, was killed by al-Qaeda two days before the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

NEPAL

Nepal's Electricity Woes

I am racing to finish this story before 2:00, when the lights go out. Today my neighborhood will have electricity from 12:00 to 2:00 and then from 7 p.m. until midnight. The scheduled outages, called "load shedding" in Nepal, are a regular part of winter here. Because of Nepal's monsoon climate and dependence on "run of the river" electricity generation, power production falls dramatically in the dry season. Every year Nepal's politicians and government promise action to resolve the problem, but nothing happens. Nepal has capacity to generate enough electricity for its own needs and to light up half of India as well as western China: The huge rivers that flow out of the Himalayas make the country second only to Brazil in potential. But it takes a long time to build hydropower plants, and it takes competent and committed government. Nepal's problem is corruption. No electricity generation proposal can be approved by the Ministry of Water Resources without massive bribes being paid. And when the government changes - Nepal has averaged one government per year since 1990 - the project is shelved until the new officials at the ministry get paid off as well. That's a severe disincentive to investment, and it's expensive. Investors willing to put up with the system factor the cost of corruption into their pricing proposals. As a result Nepal has the most expensive electricity in the region. Next-door Bhutan, which has identical geography and types of power plants, charges its

citizens about three cents per kilowatt-hour. Rates in Nepal are more than three times higher. Much smaller Bhutan generates almost twice as much power as Nepal and has enough excess to sell electricity to Bangladesh and India at 4.4 cents per kilowatt hour, generating \$245 million in annual revenue. Nepalis sit in the dark for hours every day, and according to recent news will be asked to pay even higher tariffs next year for what electricity is available. Apart from corruption, politics also get in the way of solving the country's power woes. Last year when Nepal's Maoists ran the government they promised to increase power generation to 10,000 megawatts (a 13-fold increase) within ten years. This year, no longer in power, they have forced the country's two largest new hydro development projects to cease construction, in an effort to bring down the current coalition government. With a real solution to Nepal's electricity shortage years off at best even if corruption and political interference miraculously disappeared overnight, the previous government promised to set up temporary oil-fueled generation stations to lessen the shortfall. That promise too came to naught. If only Nepal could generate electricity from political hot air..

Indians keeping fingers crossed over outcome of Feb 25 talks

India ready to discuss any issue Pakistan raises, insists its primary concern is terrorism
Officials term secretary-level talks 'beginning for opening further doors'
NEW DELHI: Indian officials are keeping their fingers crossed over the outcome of the forthcoming foreign secretary-level talks. With both countries yet to agree on the agenda and the format, there is scepticism whether Indian concerns would be actually addressed at the meeting scheduled for February 25. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is already under pressure, not only from the opposition, but also from his own cabinet and the ruling Congress party for sending peace overtures to Pakistan. During the last Cabinet Committee on Security meeting, it is reported that Indian Home Minister P Chidambaram and Defence Minister AK Antony questioned the timing of inviting Pakistan for talks. Singh, however, was backed by Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee and External Affairs Minister SM Krishna. Ready: India says it is ready to discuss any issue that Pakistan wants to raise but insists its primary issue of terrorism needed attention and should be addressed seriously. "Pakistan is free to bring to the table whatever it wants, but India will push forward its own primary concern," said an official. Krishna has categorically said terrorism would remain at the core of the discussions. Islamabad, however, is seeking more clarity on Krishna's statement and wants the inclusion of Kashmir and the water disputes in the talks. Doors: Official sources termed the secretary-level talks a beginning for opening further doors, but insisted the ultimate aim was to see if the outcome was productive. Primarily, officials are focusing on setting a stage for a meeting of prime ministers of the two countries on the sidelines of the SAARC summit scheduled for April 28 in Bhutan. The sources maintained that moving ahead at the official level would mean a meeting of the foreign ministers ahead of the SAARC summit, adding there is also a possibility of resuming the back-channel contacts. They said composite dialogue would not be confined to foreign secretary-level talks only, but would be and can be pursued at various levels. India, however, insists that these talks were not resumption of composite dialogue. "This is a meeting to discuss further talks and the kind of relationship we are heading to," the sources said. They describe the talks as a testing

ground to reassess Pakistan's sincerity and review progress into the Mumbai attacks' investigations. India had earlier admitted to noting progress by Pakistan in processing cases against alleged culprits of the attacks and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba operatives.

China Intensifies Tug of War With India on Nepal

Published: February 17, 2010 KATMANDU, Nepal — For years, Nepal never bothered too much with policing its northern border with China. The Himalayas seemed a formidable-enough barrier, and Nepal's political and economic attention was oriented south toward India. If Nepal was a mouse trapped between elephants, as the local saying went, the elephant that mattered most was India. But last week a Nepalese government delegation visited Beijing on a trip that underscored, once again, how China's newfound weight in the world is altering old geopolitical equations. As Nepal's home minister, Bhim Rawal, met with China's top security officials, Chinese state media reported that the two countries had agreed to cooperate on border security, while Nepal restated its commitment to preventing any "anti-China" events on its side of the border. Details of the meetings were not yet known, but the two countries were expected to finalize a program under which China would provide money, training and logistical support to help Nepal expand police checkpoints in isolated regions of its northern border. The reason for the deal is simple: Tibet. At a time when President Obama's decision to meet with the Dalai Lama has infuriated China, Mr. Rawal's meetings in Beijing could have greater practical effect on the lives of Tibetans. Prodded by China, Nepal is now moving to close the Himalayan passages through which Tibetans have long made secret trips in and out of China, often on pilgrimages to visit the Dalai Lama in his exile in India. If it once regarded Nepal with intermittent interest, China is now exerting itself more broadly toward its small Himalayan neighbor, analysts say — partly because of its concern that Nepal could become a locus of Tibetan agitation, partly as another South Asian stage in its growing soft-power fencing match in the region with India. "Nepal has become a very interesting space where the big players are playing at two levels," said Ashok Gurung, director of the India China Institute at The New School. "One is their relationship with Nepal. And the second is the relationship between India and China." In the broadest sense, India and China share similar goals in Nepal. Each wants Nepal's political situation to stabilize and is watching closely as the country's Maoists negotiate with other political parties over a new constitution that would fundamentally reshape the government. Each is also worried about security, as India is concerned about political agitation on the Nepalese side of their shared border, as well as the possibility that terrorists trained in Pakistan could transit through Nepal. But India is also paying close attention to what many India experts consider newfound Chinese activism in South Asia, whether by building ports in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, or signing new agreements with even the tiniest South Asian nations like the Maldives. An expanding Chinese presence in Nepal would be especially alarming to India, given that India and Nepal share a long and deliberately porous border. "India has always been concerned about what access China might have in Nepal," said Sridhar Khatri, executive director of the South Asia Center for Policy Studies in Katmandu. "India has always considered South Asia to be its backyard, like a Monroe Doctrine." From China's perspective, Nepal's geopolitical significance rose after Tibetan protests erupted in March 2008, five months before Beijing hosted the Olympic Games. Those protests began inside China, in Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, and other

Tibetan regions, but also spread across the border to Katmandu, where an estimated 12,000 Tibetans live. Even as Chinese officials were able to block international media coverage of the crackdown under way in Tibet, the protests in Nepal attracted global attention as photographs circulated of the Nepalese police subduing Tibetan protesters. In a few cases, media outlets mistakenly identified the photographs as coming from inside Tibet. "There was a shift after March," Mr. Gurung said. "The Chinese realized that Nepal is going to be an important site where they could potentially be embarrassed on Tibetan issues." V. R. Raghavan, a retired general in the Indian Army, said that China for years had tacitly allowed Tibetans to cross into Nepal, many of whom were making pilgrimages or attending universities in India. But the March protests made China realize that it had a "southern window" that needed to be closed, he said. "Every movement of important personages and priests and others from Tibet has taken place through Nepal," said General Raghavan, now director of the Delhi Policy Group, a research institute.

Nepali Congress threatens to take up arms if Maoists resort to violence

PTI, Feb 19, 2010, 05.22pm IST KATHMANDU: A senior leader of the Nepali Congress has warned the Maoists to shun the politics of violence, threatening that his party would be forced to take up arms in retaliation if do not mend their ways. NC central committee member Khum Bahadur Khadka said the Unified-CPN (Maoist), which has not yet dissolved its military and paramilitary organisation, would be wiped out if his party was forced to pick arms and retaliate with equal force. "I have the feeling that Maoists will once again re-grab their weapons... in the likelihood the Nepali Congress will also retaliate with weapons," the former home minister said. "It would signal the end of Maoists' Party in Nepal," he told reporters at Reporters Club here on Thursday. He also said that he was forwarding a proposal to the NC high command to constitute Tarun Dasta, a paramilitary force, to counter the violent activities of the Maoist Young Communist League (YCL). Khadka asked the Maoists to show seriousness to the 12-point political understanding, particularly on the issue of integration of the People's Army and return of the seized lands to their owners. Khadka said the new constitution cannot be promulgated without the support of the Maoists, and asked the party to join the government and lend support in constitution drafting.

Nepal blames Indo-Pak tension for tycoon murder

TNN, Feb 16, 2010, KATHMANDU: Nepal's Information and Communications Minister Shankar Pokhrel, who is also the spokesman of the current Madhav Kumar Nepal government, has stirred up a hornets' nest by reportedly saying at a media interaction that Nepal's enigmatic media baron Jamim Shah was probably killed due to the "tension between India and Pakistan". Pokhrel's statement Sunday was the first semi-official acknowledgement that the killing of Jamim Shah, the media entrepreneur said to be Dawood Ibrahim's aide in Nepal and associated with Pakistan's ISI, was not due to media-related activities or personal animosity but deeper, political reasons. With Nepal Police Monday calling the gunning down of Shah by two professional killers in the capital last week the handiwork of Indian gangster Babloo Srivastav, New Delhi faces unspoken charges in Nepal that government agencies colluded with the jailed don to execute Shah, who was also said to be involved in the 1999 hijacking of an Indian Airlines aircraft. Pokhrel, speaking out of turn even as Nepal's police, government and media have remained silent on Shah's Pakistan connexions, also reportedly said that

Muslims in Nepal were becoming victims of the Indo-Pak tension. It was an unhappy reminder of the handing over of two Kashmiri Muslims to Indian authorities by Nepal in the recent past on the allegation that the men were terrorists wanted for the Mumbai blasts. However, both governments were left red-faced when an Indian court asked for the two detainees to be released after it was discovered that they were not the wanted men.

The Indian government on Tuesday objected to Pokhrel's reported statement. The Indian Embassy in Kathmandu issued a statement, saying it was surprised at the reports. "No information to substantiate the reported statement by the Hon'ble Minister has been provided by the Government of Nepal to this embassy," the terse statement said. The new development comes at a time Nepal's first President, Dr Ram Baran Yadav, is visiting New Delhi to deepen ties with the Indian government. On Tuesday, Yadav was accorded a ceremonial reception by Indian President Pratibha Patil at the Rastrapati Bhawan.

Former Indian envoy to Nepal Shyam Saran quits PMO

NEW DELHI: Shyam Saran, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on climate change, resigned from his post, sources in the government confirmed late today. The sudden resignation of Saran, a former Foreign Secretary (FS) who served as Indian envoy to Nepal and to Mauritius, comes within weeks of his successor as FS and junior colleague Shivshankar Menon being appointed National Security Advisor, thereby superseding Saran who was Menon's senior in the Indian Foreign Service. During his brief tenure as Ambassador to Nepal, Saran was credited with introducing an element of pragmatism earlier lacking in the bilateral relationship. It is a measure of the high regard in which he was held as a professional that, though identified by the then BJP government led by Atal Behari Vajpayee to become FS, Saran was called in from Kathmandu to become India's top diplomat in June 2004, after the Congress-led UPA government assumed power. Once negotiations for the Indo-US civil nuclear deal were concluded, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh appointed Saran as his Special Envoy on climate change. While Saran was part of the core team of Indian negotiators in various international forums on climate issues, including most recently at Copenhagen, there were reports that the appointment of Jairam Ramesh as the Minister of State for Environment and Forests considerably curbed the scope of Saran's functions. However, Menon's appointment as NSA with minister of state rank, forced Saran to quit the Prime Minister's office. Although there has been no official announcement, according to sources, Saran will leave the PMO on March 14.

India wheat futures steady on output, exports

MUMBAI, Feb 19 (Reuters) - India's wheat futures ended steady on Friday as hopes government may allow exports outweighed a bumper output and open market sale of the commodity, analysts said. March wheat contract NWITH0 ended at 1,312.8 rupees per 100 kg, down 0.15 percent. India on Friday raised its wheat crop estimate to a record 82 million tonnes, the second upgrade in a week on favourable weather and making it more likely the country will lift a ban on exports. See [ID:nSGE61I06G] India may release wheat under the open market scheme (OMSS) in a week using electronic auction facility, a top industry official told Reuters on Wednesday. "Wheat is caught in confusion. We have enough stock, so exports are possible but the rice output has dropped, so more wheat may be used in public distribution schemes," said an analyst with a Delhi-based

brokerage.India's annual domestic requirement of wheat is about 76 million tonnes. See [ID:nSEG6190BB]India last week allowed export of wheat to neighbour Nepal, a move analysts expect may pave the way for private exports.The world's second-biggest producer of wheat banned overseas sales of the grain in February 2007, but lifted the restriction last July for a few days, but no export deals were struck.A state-run firm would soon be allowed to export an additional 200,000 tonnes of the grain to Nepal, government sources told Reuters on Wednesday.

Sugar: Centre says no to Nepal, yes to EU

India is learnt to have refused visiting Nepal President Ram Baran Yadav's request to provide sugar to the neighbouring country. The denial comes at a time when the Centre's decision to export 10,000 tonnes of sugar to the European Union has sparked a blame-game among UPA partners, all of whom wish to shirk responsibility for the decision as sugar prices remain high.AICC spokesman Manish Tewari said that the Commerce Ministry, headed by Anand Sharma, had given permission to export sugar at the insistence of the Indian Sugar Exim Corporation, "which squarely falls within the larger family of the Agriculture Ministry". Tewari, however, added that he had been informed by the Commerce Ministry that the decision to export sugar to the EU was because of "contractual obligation". "I spoke to the Commerce Minister today. It is true that permission (to export sugar) has been given. We are told that it was under contractual obligation. The (Directorate General of Foreign Trade) notification says that authorisation was given at the request of Sugar Exim Corporation, which squarely falls within the larger family of Agriculture Ministry. Commerce Ministry or Agriculture Ministry will be in a better position to explain it (decision to export)," Tewari told reporters here.

Judge awards \$395,000 seized from store clerk's accounts to the real Mega Millions winner

AUSTIN – Willis Willis of Grand Prairie finally saw some cash from his stolen, million-dollar lottery ticket Tuesday.A state district judge signed an order turning over to Willis \$395,000 that had been seized from the bank accounts of the former store clerk accused of stealing Willis' winning ticket last summer. The clerk fled to Asia and is wanted by authorities."I feel very good," said Willis, after a court hearing where state District Judge Bob Perkins said he was satisfied the money belonged to Willis. "I'm just glad I'm at the point where everything is pretty well close to being over – and I'm elated."The 67-year-old maintenance man had purchased the Mega Millions ticket at the Lucky Food Store in Grand Prairie last May and didn't discover until months later that it was a million-dollar winner. By then, Pankaj Joshi, a clerk at the store, had cashed in the ticket and left the country, authorities say.The Travis County district attorney's office was able to track down \$365,000 in Joshi's bank accounts and recovered another \$30,000 from one of his relatives and a friend. Officials said they can issue Willis a check within a couple of days. The district attorney also is trying to freeze \$290,000 that was wired to a bank in Nepal.In all, the ticket was worth \$750,000 after federal taxes were deducted.Willis' attorney, Randy Howry, said he and his client remain hopeful they can collect most of the rest of the winnings."We're going to continue to go after whomever we have to, whether that is by lawsuit or whether that means we have to go to Nepal to track down these funds," he said. "We're going to get the rest of Willis' money, however that comes

about."Howry also said that a lawsuit against the Texas Lottery Commission remains an option if the money transferred to Nepal cannot be recovered. Lottery commission officials have denied any responsibility in the theft.Travis County Assistant District Attorney Patty Robertson, who recommended to the judge that the \$395,000 seized by authorities be awarded to Willis, said her office is working with the government of Nepal to seize the funds sent there."We're trying to get that money brought back to the United States," she said after Tuesday's hearing, adding that authorities are also still looking for Joshi.After Willis bought several Mega Millions tickets at the store in May, he returned after the drawing to see if he had won. Joshi told him that one of the tickets paid \$2, saying nothing about the million-dollar winner, authorities said.Willis insisted he is not angry about the turn of events, and he even offered a message for Joshi: "Have a happy day, wherever you are."

Willis said he was surprised and grateful that Perkins ordered the money released so quickly, but he has no immediate plans to spend it, other than to help his daughter pay for college.

"I want to sit down and think about what I'm going to do with it," he said. "I will spend the money wisely."

But he smiled as he said one thing was certain: "It does mean I won't have to go back to work."

http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/texasouthwest/stories/DN-williswillis_17met.ART0.State.Edition1.4c1e559.html

Nepal's demobbed Maoists face uncertain future

Nepali village children proudly talk of the bravery of Gurkha veterans who fought for the UK in the second world war, the Falklands and other conflicts – but few among the thousands of former Maoist rebels still in camps awaiting demobilisation expect a hero's return.Bhim Bahadur Rithameli is apprehensive about the welcome he will get when he returns home to Bhajang district. Mr Rithameli, 22, joined the Maoist rebel army six years ago as a teenager, rose to become a section commander and was wounded in clashes with Nepali security forces.

India vows to retaliate against Maoist rebels -

"I will have to think seriously about my future," he said while preparing to leave a Maoist camp as part of a UN effort to weed out 4,008 fighters who joined the rebels as children or after 2006 when a peace agreement ended the insurgency.Mr Rithameli and many of the others drummed out had hoped to stay, because the remaining 19,602 Maoist fighters are to be given positions in the national security forces under the 2006 truce, though their integration has been repeatedly delayed amid resistance by army leaders to taking former foes into the ranks."We were not ineligible while fighting the war for so many years for the party, so how come we have been labelled disqualified now?" asked Kalpana Upadhyay, who was preparing to leave camp with a toddler but without her husband, who was staying behind with the rest of the fighters.The discharged fighters' anxiety has been fuelled by their lack of job skills, poor domestic employment prospects and discrimination worries. To help their start, the discharged fighters were promised

NRs20,000 (\$270) each and vocational training or other schooling. Ms Upadhyay married a fellow Maoist fighter four years ago. "Last night, we stayed together discussing our future," she said struggling to control her tears. The fighters have been living in seven camps around Nepal since the war's end. Though the UN had identified soldiers for discharge two years ago, the Maoists held back, and young troops have pushed for more enticing support packages from the UN and Kathmandu. This month UN and Nepali officials sweetened the package by extending an offer to send former fighters who had reached adulthood abroad as labourers. The country sends about 200,000 workers overseas each year to work primarily in the Gulf, India and Malaysia. Lalit Bhandari, 20, said he could not understand why he was judged ineligible to join the security forces given that he fought for the Maoists for 10 years. He was worried that society would not welcome him back. Nepal's political parties have been deadlocked in discussions over the future of the government and the army for more than a year. The peace agreement set a deadline for the establishment of a constitution by May 27, but little headway has been made. "The new constitution won't be promulgated until the combatants are integrated. If not, the Maoists would steal the power and elections," said Shankar Pokharel, minister for information and communications.

Nepal Maoists celebrate 'People's War' amid angst

IANSTwelve years after they took up arms against the government and four years after the rebellion ended with a truce, Nepal's former Maoist guerrillas on Saturday celebrated the anniversary of the uprising amidst angst and suspicion of the ruling parties. Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda, the farmer's son who was catapulted into world limelight in February 1996 when he led his Maoist party to war against Nepal's powerful royal family and the government, said he saw no reason for optimism. Mr. Prachanda, who signed a peace pact in 2006 ending the 10-year "People's War" fought by his party, told party mouthpiece Janadisha daily that he feared a "remote-controlled" move by the Indian government to disband the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Calling it a "huge conspiracy" supported by members of Nepal's current government, Mr. Prachanda said there would be an upheaval if the "conspiracy" to keep the PLA out of the national army succeeded. On the anniversary of the guerrilla war that was the catalyst transforming Nepal from a Hindu kingdom to a secular republic, the Maoists, now a mainstream party, also announced a new round of protests against the current government. It is a continuation of the protests started by them last year, after the government they had formed following an electoral victory fell over their attempt to sack the chief of the Nepal Army. The sacked general was reinstated by President Ram Baran Yadav, causing the eventual collapse of Prime Minister Prachanda's government. Though the Maoists have been opposing the move since 2008, the new coalition government has refused to undo the presidential step. A second bone of contention between the former rebels and the government is the PLA's future. Though in the 2006 peace pact both sides agreed to induct the PLA in the national army, the merger has not taken place even four years later due to opposition by army officials, who fear it would lead to the politicization of the army. On Saturday, a high-level committee including members of the ruling parties and the Maoists met in the capital to discuss the situation. However, the meeting ended

inconclusively after Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal sought to push the rehabilitation of the PLA but the Maoists demanded a political resolution before they agreed to disband the guerrilla army. By political resolution, the Maoists are seeking the formation of a new government under their leadership, claiming it was the People's War that brought the new changes in Nepal. The protracted stalemate has raised serious doubts about the fate of nearly 19,000 PLA soldiers who remain confined to barracks since the insurgency ended and the new constitution that has to be promulgated by May. The international community says there will be no lasting peace in insurgency-racked Nepal as long as there are two armies. However, with the PLA still intact, the Maoists celebrated Saturday also as PLA Day in imitation of Army Day celebrated a day earlier. The PLA held tourneys in Kathmandu's prime sports stadium as a reminder to the country and the world that it was still a force to reckon with.

Nepal's ex-princesses mean business

TNN, Feb 18, 2010, 0KATHMANDU: One of the abiding places of interest in Nepal's furiously changing capital is the Narayanhity, the pink pagoda building that was once the palace of the Shah dynasty of kings but now is open to visitors as a national palace. A stone's throw away from the palace is now a second object of curiosity now at the shopping arcade of the Hotel de l'Annapurna, one of Nepal's first five-star hotels where the deposed royal family still holds stakes. It is the newly opened Beatification on the topmost floor, a sprawling boutique offering a spectacular view of the city's skyline outside and inside intricately embroidered saris and lehengas. The newest boutique in the world's newest republic is the business venture of a former princess and members of Nepal's aristocracy: Sitashma Shah, daughter of the late Prince Dharendra, who along with his eldest brother Birendra died in the infamous massacre in the Narayanhity during a family dinner in 2001; Rochana Shahi, daughter of the former queen's brother Suraj Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana, and Vivek Upadhy, great grandson of Nepal's first attorney-general Kali Prasad Upadhy and cousin of veteran Bollywood star Manisha Koirala. The boutique was inaugurated by the former queen herself, and the opening crowds also saw the presence of her daughter, former princess Prerana, as well as Sitashma's two sisters, former princesses Puja and Dilasha. The three business partners are also directors of BARS International, the company that owns the boutique. BARS includes Sitashma's four-year-old daughter Arshia as well. While Vivek is a former sous-chef who left a cushy job at the Taj Palace in Dubai to follow his greater passion for designing, for his two partners, it is their first job. "I had never thought of doing a 9 to 5 job," says Rochana, who is married to a pilot with Buddha Airlines, Sanjay Bir Shahi. "But here I am now, doing something that at times requires me to be staying up at the boutique till 11pm!" The saris and dresses are made by karigars in Delhi, Jaipur and Lucknow based on Vivek's designs. The trio is also using an export house, Besuited, to market their western wear. The clothes on offer range in price from a modest NRS 6,000 to NRS 35,000 and more, depending on the intricacy of the design and the materials used. The certificate issued by the government to the company with its permanent account number has pride of place on the walls of the boutique along with a photo of the deposed king and queen. While Vivek handles the creative designs and Rochana finance, Sitashma looks after management. The former princess with a degree in business management from Scotland and her partners are at the boutique from 1030am regularly,

starting the day with a morning business meeting and then dealing with buyers who drop in as well as curious onlookers and the media. While Sitashma is yet to get over the former royals' famous penchant for privacy and shunning the media, she promises she will be talking to the press soon. Meanwhile, commoner visitors gawk at the former princess showing them the boutique's offerings and, what's more, folding the displayed clothes and putting them back in their proper place on the racks. "We get more ordinary people than the aristocracy," says Rochana. "They walk in expecting to see something different. But we are like other normal people."

PM Nepal slams Maoists for obstructing works at GMR's project

Kathmandu, Feb 18 (PTI) Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal today slammed the Maoists for obstructing work on the 600 MW Upper Marsyangdi project in Western Nepal, a major hydro-power scheme developed by Indian energy giant GMR. Nepal asked the Maoists not to disrupt works on the Upper Marsyangdi Power Project in Lamjung district of Western Nepal. India's GMR Energy Consortium has been carrying out survey works on the project. He asked the Maoists not to put obstacle on any development works and not to mix politics in economic activities. Nepal, however assured that the government is committed to maintain peace and security in the project site. Upper Marsyangdi is one of the major hydro-power projects being developed in Nepal by the Indian energy giant. Prior to this the Maoists have threatened to halt the works at 300 MW Upper Karnali, also being developed by GMR.

SRILANKA

Tragic triumphalism in Sri Lanka

A YEAR ago, as Sri Lanka's long and agonising civil war entered its endgame phase, there was little indication that the bloody denouement would make way for the healing and reconciliation that the island-nation so desperately needs. The manner in which the army conducted its final assault in the Tamil-dominated north and east precluded such a possibility in the short run. And neither President Mahinda Rajapaksa nor army chief Gen Sarath Fonseka made much of an effort to suggest they would be gracious in victory. Who could have guessed, though, that they would turn into implacable foes within weeks of that military triumph, and that one of them would imprison the other just a few months later? Fonseka has been threatened with court martial on the charge of conspiring to overthrow the government. And a military trial has been justified on the basis that the plot was hatched while he was still in uniform. That's an implausible scenario. Sri Lanka does not have a tradition of military coups. There is no question that its armed forces have grown progressively stronger and more influential in recent decades as the country has morphed into a security state, and that is always an unhealthy sign. But that troubling circumstance can hardly be construed as evidence of Fonseka's culpability.

The fact is that he left the army and took on Rajapaksa in last month's presidential election. That isn't how military plotters generally behave. Rajapaksa won by a substantial margin and, notwithstanding the misgivings of Fonseka and some of his

supporters, international observers found few signs of electoral fraud. The retired general had managed to rally behind his presidential bid a remarkably broad coalition that ranged from Sinhalese radicals to Tamil parties, and included former president Chandrika Kumaratunga, who not so long ago headed the Sri Lanka Freedom Party that Rajapaksa now leads. By and large, however, this reflected not so much an endorsement of Fonseka as a desire to relegate Rajapaksa, whose reputation for corruption and predilection for nepotism is compounded by a disturbing personality cult and a disinclination to countenance dissent. That desire appears to have been widely shared in the capital Colombo, where Fonseka handsomely outvoted his rival. But the Sinhalese countryside appears to be solidly behind Rajapaksa, who has every intention of capitalising on his current standing and the opposition's confusion: he has prematurely dissolved the national parliament and elections are expected to take place by early April. A two-thirds majority — which may prove hard to achieve, but isn't out of the question — would hand him unprecedented power. As executive president, Rajapaksa is already head of state and government as well as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. In addition, he has kept the defence and finance portfolios for himself, and — ominously — has expressed an interest in taking over the information ministry as well. One of his brothers, Basil, is a senior presidential adviser; another, Gotabhaya, is the defence secretary. The president's 23-year-old son, Namal, is likely to be a candidate in the coming parliamentary elections. Some years ago, Rajapaksa told a long-time friend that his sons were his greatest joy and he loved spending time with them, so he left it to his brothers to operate the machinery of state. This intriguing snippet emerged when that friend, prominent newspaper editor Lasantha Wickremtunga, was shot dead in Colombo in January last year. He left behind a remarkable indictment of the Rajapaksa regime, in which he said: "When finally I am killed, it will be the government that kills me", but also hinted at a military role in silencing him. In the same article, Wickremtunga accurately described the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam as one of "the most ruthless and bloodthirsty organisations to have infested the planet" and called for its eradication, but added: "To do so by violating the rights of Tamil citizens, bombing and shooting mercilessly, is not only wrong but shames the Sinhalese, whose claim to be custodians of the dharma is forever called into question by this savagery — much of it unknown to the public because of censorship." Equally aptly, he pointed out that "a military occupation of the north and east will require the Tamil people of those regions to live eternally as second-class citizens". Until recently, huge numbers of Tamils were incarcerated in concentration camps where they were routinely maltreated. Estimates of the civilian toll in the final stages of the civil war tend to be speculative, but it would have been uncharacteristic of either the Tigers or the army to go out of their way to avoid civilian casualties. Sri Lanka's drift towards one-man — or at least one-family — rule through an ostensibly democratic process (albeit in the absence of a free flow of information, a crucial ingredient of meaningful democracy) is deeply unfortunate, but even more tragic is the apparent lack of concern among most Sinhalese for the plight and prospects of their Tamil compatriots. There are, thankfully, sections of the intelligentsia and other segments of society that tend to speak out against human rights abuses, but what are the chances that they will be able to resist Rajapaksa's determination to silence them? It's harder to say how he will react to a plea from the country's leading Buddhist monks that Fonseka be freed. After all, Rajapaksa loves being photographed in temples on national

occasions. Be that as it may, the dispute between the two of them comes across as a personality clash more than anything else. A disgruntled ex-general miffed at having been offered the humiliating post of sports minister probably won't count for much in the slightly longer run, unless Rajapaksa is foolish enough to make a martyr of him. Like many of its South Asian neighbours, Sri Lanka deserves a far better leadership, a redistributive development strategy (based in part on a sharp decline in 'defence' expenditure, now that the war is over), and a more pluralist form of democracy.

Sri Lanka slams EU on cutting trade benefits

Sri Lanka criticised Tuesday a decision by European Union nations to withdraw preferential trade benefits from Sri Lanka if it failed to respect human rights obligations. The decision Monday came after an "exhaustive" investigation "identified significant shortcomings" by the island nation in implementing UN human rights conventions, the EU Commission said. Sri Lanka's foreign ministry said the European Union had set "unattainable targets" for the island to avoid withdrawal of trade benefits. The EU has said suspension of the GSP+ (Generalised System of Preferences plus) benefits will not take effect for six months "giving Sri Lanka extra time to address the problems identified." The EU wants Sri Lanka to implement within six months laws aimed at ensuring the independence of the judiciary, the police, the civil service and the elections department and ensure that minimum human rights standards are met. Sri Lanka's foreign ministry said it will continue its dialogue with the Commission, but said discussions should be "sensitive" to the island's sovereignty. Colombo maintains that any probe of its rights record will be a violation of its sovereignty. The GSP+ scheme gives 16 poor nations preferential access to the trading bloc in return for following strict commitments on a wide variety of social and rights issues. Sri Lankan troops have been accused of a host of rights violations including the indiscriminate killing of thousands of Tamil civilians, the murder of aid workers and the execution of surrendering rebels. The Tiger rebels faced similar charges, but the guerrilla leadership was killed by government forces in May last year when they crushed the insurgency. Sri Lanka gains about 150 million dollars annually due to preferential tariffs, which mainly benefit the clothing industry, according to trade estimates. The UN has said over 7,000 civilians perished in the final months of fighting while between 80,000 to 100,000 people were believed to have died in 37 years of fighting.

Sri Lanka unlikely to buy IMF gold right now

Published on Thu, Feb 18, 2010

Sri Lanka central bank is unlikely to buy more gold from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) right now as the island nation has already reached its required reserve level, its governor said on Thursday. The IMF has said it would soon begin sales of 191.3 tonnes of gold remaining in its plan to raise new resources for lending, with traders saying it may seek buyers among Asian central banks. "Unlikely right now," Governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal told Reuters when asked whether Sri Lanka's central bank is considering purchase of gold from the IMF. "We have reached the certain level we wanted to reach. I think that is comfortable for us. But we will be watching the situation how best we want to diversify our reserves." The price of gold has increased by 20% over the past two years. The prospects of more buying from central banks helped fuel a rally to a

record above USD 1,200 early last December. Sri Lanka's reserves are now at over USD 5 billion including gold, according to the central bank data. The central bank, which does not sell gold locally, has not given details of its gold reserves so far. The IMF sold 10 tons of gold to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka in November. The IMF announced last year it would sell 403.3 tonnes of gold, about one-eighth of its total stock, to diversify its sources of income and increase low-cost lending to poor. Until now, the gold has only been made available to central banks on a first-come-first-serve basis. So far, India -- the world's biggest consumer of gold -- Mauritius and Sri Lanka have purchased a total of 212 tonnes of gold from the IMF.

Lanka determined to Court Martial Fonseka

COLOMBO: Despite protests from the national opposition parties and the international community, the Sri Lankan government appears to be determined to Court Martial former Army Commander and defeated Presidential candidate Gen. Sarath Fonseka, reliable sources say. It is unofficially learnt that the Court Martial would be headed by the senior most officer in the tri-services, Air Chief Marshal Roshan Goonetilleke. The choice of ACM Goonetilleke is expected to meet the criticism from Fonseka's lawyers that he cannot be tried by officers who are junior to him in service. Since Fonseka was Chief of Defence Staff, with jurisdiction over the three services, and the charges against him relate to his tenure as CDS also, a non army officer could also be on the panel of judges. That the government is keen on going through the process which it had begun, has been evident from some events and actions. Firstly, Fonseka was arrested under the Army Act using the Military Police, and then he was lodged in a house once used by the present navy chief, Adm. Tissera Samarasinghe.

MAHANAYAKES MANAGED

Secondly, the government was not alarmed by the letter which the top leaders of the Buddhist clergy, called the Mahanayakes, had written to President Rajapaksa, on the Fonseka affair. The letter had asserted the Mahanayakes' "traditional right" to intervene in matters of State, and on that basis, demanded the release of Fonseka. The government did not openly challenge the Mahanayakes, but it is learnt that it put it to them firmly that it was doing the right thing. It said that it had clinching evidence against Fonseka. The war hero had been plotting against the government, gathering his own clique within the army, using deserters, encouraging desertion, and joining hands with subversive political forces outside even while in service. The Mahanayakes, who were to meet on February 18, to discuss the response to their letter and chalk out the next course of action, indefinitely postponed the meeting.

INTERNATIONAL PROTESTS DISREGARDED

While the Indian government expressed the hope that Sri Lanka would go through "due process" in the Fonseka case, the opposition BJP sought New Delhi's intervention to stop the persecution of the Lankan war hero. The US too pleaded for due process, subtly indicating that it did not approve a Court Martial. British opposition MP and foreign affairs specialist Dr. Liam Fox was more direct. He told President Rajapaksa here on Wednesday, that Fonseka should be tried by a civil court to ensure transparency and safeguard Sri Lanka's reputation abroad. But the Sri Lankan government appears to have disregarded these pleas. Liam Fox was told that the Court Martial would be carried out under what is basically and originally, British law.

IMPORTANCE OF GOTABAYA

It is said that Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa is particularly keen that Fonseka's should be tried by Court Martial, partly because Fonseka had publicly tried to implicate him in "war crimes". Even as Fonseka's lawyers argued in the Supreme Court that Fonseka could not be tried by Court Martial, Gotabaya told Straits Times that he would be tried by Court Martial. In the Rajapaksa regime, Gotabaya is the final word in military matters.

GOTABAYA BRIEFS INDIAN OFFICIALS IN DELHI

Significantly, Gotabaya is currently in New Delhi, briefing Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao and the National Security Advisor Shivahankar Menon on the evidence gathered against Fonseka and what the Rajapaksa government plans to do in the case. Ostensibly, the Lankan Defense Secretary is in New Delhi to see the DEFEXPO INDIA 2010, an event for which he had been invited by the exhibition authorities. But really, Gotabaya has other more important business to attend to.

INDIA REFITS MALDIVIAN SHIP FOR RS.7 CRORE

India has finished refitting a Maldivian Coast Guard vessel Uravi at a cost of Indian Rs.7 crore and has despatched the vessel to the Maldives escorted by the Indian Coast Guard vessel

Jayasuriya to stand for Sri Lanka parliament seat

Veteran batsman Sanath Jayasuriya says he will enter politics after cricket authorities cleared his bid to stand for a Sri Lanka parliament seat. Jayasuriya said Thursday he accepted an invitation from President Mahinda Rajapaksa to contest the April election in his southern hometown of Matara. Cricket board chief Somachandra de Silva says that he has agreed to Jayasuriya's request for permission to stand for parliament because the player's contract doesn't stipulate against players entering politics. The 40-year-old veteran of 110 tests and 444 one-day internationals is currently out of the national side.

Sri Lanka in Talks to Buy Emirates' Stake in Carrier (Update1)

February 17, 2010, 04:38 AM EST By Anusha Ondaatjie and Asantha Sirimanne Feb. 17 (Bloomberg) -- Sri Lanka's government is in talks to buy Emirates Airline's stake in the national carrier, SriLankan Airlines Chairman Nishanta Wickremasinghe said. "The government has decided to purchase," Wickremasinghe said in an interview in capital Colombo yesterday. "They are negotiating," he said, declining to elaborate. The government owns 51 percent of the airline while Emirates has 43.6 percent. Emirates said two years ago it may consider selling its stake after abandoning a decade-long management of the airline. Sri Lanka's government is seeking to lure back tourists into the island, rated by the New York Times as the top destination to visit in 2010, after ending a 26-year civil war. "Emirates can confirm that the Sri Lankan government has been investigating the possibility of increasing their share in SriLankan Airlines," the Middle East carrier said in a statement. Sri Lanka's government took over the running of the airline in April 2008 after Dubai-based Emirates decided not to renew its contract. Emirates said then the stake may be worth \$150 million. The Middle East's largest airline bought a 40 percent stake in the south Asian country's biggest carrier in 1998 for \$70 million. SriLankan Air slumped to a loss of 10 billion rupees (\$87 million) in the year ended March, hurt by dwindling tourist arrivals and the global recession.

Sri Lanka celebrates Independence Day

ISLAMABAD: Sri Lankan High Commissioner (HC) Air Chief Marshal (r) Jayalath Weerakkody hosted a reception on Wednesday to celebrate their 62nd Independence Day. The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka got independence in 1948 after over hundred years of being a British Crown Colony. The day is official holiday and is celebrated with parades, pageants and cultural programmes. Over a period of 2,500 years, the island was known by a variety of names. The ancient Greeks and Romans knew Sri Lanka as "Taprobane." Arab writers and sailors in olden days knew Sri Lanka as "Serendip." According to the Sri Lankan historical tradition, "Lanka" was the original name of the island. It was in use for centuries until the European invasions in the 15th century. During the British period (1815-1948), the island was popularly known as "Ceylon." This name was used even after the country gained independence in 1948. With the adoption of the New Constitution in 1972, the traditional name "Sri Lanka" (resplendent island) was adopted keeping in view the rich and varied culture of the nation. Colombo is the country's largest city. A large number of local and foreign guests including diplomats, politicians, parliamentarians, businessmen, government officials, journalists and others attended the reception. Minister for Food and Agriculture Nazar Muhammad Gondal represented the government of Pakistan on the occasion and joined the Sri Lankan HC in the cake cutting ceremony.

Sri Lanka shares at 1-wk high on Keells foreign buying

COLOMBO, Feb 18 (Reuters) - Sri Lanka's benchmark stock index gained on Thursday to a one-week high led by foreign buying in market heavyweight John Keells Holdings JKH.CM on strong earning hopes, brokers said. The All-Share Price Index .CSE of the Colombo Stock Exchange closed up 0.31 percent or 11.65 points to 3,732.77, its highest since Feb. 11. Top conglomerate John Keells Holdings rose 0.9 percent to 169.50 rupees. Analysts said foreigners would have bought the shares in the top bluechip with high profit expectations along with the island nation's post-war economic optimism. The conglomerate had posted a 49 percent rise in its December quarter profit on Jan. 25. On Thursday, foreigners bought a net of 162.6 million rupees, mainly due to Keells buying. Saminda Weerasinghe, head of research at Acuity Stockbrokers, said retail investors are mainly in the buying side. The market had been dragged down in recent weeks by political worries and EU concerns. Street protests over the arrest of defeated presidential candidate General Sarath Fonseka since Feb. 8 and an announcement by the European Union to withdraw a trade concession have hurt investor sentiment. Foreigners, who sold net 785.3 million rupees worth of shares in 2009, have sold a net 4.2 billion worth shares so far this year. The net foreign selling amounts to 1.7 billion rupees since the Jan. 26 presidential election results are announced.

China's Sri Lanka port raises concern

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia, Feb. 17 (UPI) -- China's construction of a port in Sri Lanka and a Chinese admiral's suggestion Beijing build a naval base in the Gulf of Aden has raised fears in the Middle East that a confrontation between China and India is looming along vital energy export routes.

Both the Asian titans, whose economies continue to expand despite the global financial meltdown, are heavily dependent on Middle Eastern oil and will become more so as

supplies dwindle. The Indians are building their naval forces across these vital shipping lanes through which some 85 percent of China's oil supplies pass along with raw materials from Africa. Inevitably, these will increasingly encroach on Middle Eastern and African waters as Beijing seeks to protect the economic arteries on which it is becoming increasingly dependent all the way from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea. This is causing grave concern in India, which is vying for the same energy and mineral resources as China. This raises the prospect, distant though it may be, of a confrontation between the two. The region is vital too for the Gulf states as an energy export and trading route as they increasingly look eastward. There is also the possibility that one day China and the United States, which has long been the dominant naval force in the Indian Ocean, may also clash. New Delhi views China's efforts to expand its regional clout through its "string of pearls" strategy -- ringing India with naval bases and electronic listening posts -- as an attempt to muscle into waters India has long considered its own. Indeed, the Chinese are seeking to protect their maritime trade further east as well in the Strait of Malacca, a major shipping choke point between Malaysia and Indonesia that links the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Beijing wants to ensure unhindered access to the narrow waterway for its energy shipments. The construction of the \$1 billion container port at Hambantota, until recently a fishing hamlet on Sri Lanka's southeastern coast, illustrates how the Chinese thrust into the Indian Ocean is becoming more pronounced. The deep-water port will include a development zone and an oil refinery. Over the last few years, the Chinese have built a similar port at Gwadar on Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast, which will eventually be the terminal for pipelines carrying Gulf crude and natural gas to western China. Another is planned at Chittagong in Bangladesh, an oil refinery terminal in the northern Bay of Bengal east of India. These could become bases for China's growing submarine fleet, a potential threat to the arterial shipping lanes running east from the Persian Gulf. The Chinese are reported to have established a naval base in Myanmar and intelligence surveillance bases on islands across the Bay of Bengal. Another is reportedly being built on Marao Island in the Maldives chain that runs south toward the British base of Diego Garcia, currently manned by U.S. forces. Beijing says it has no interest in establishing major foreign bases so far from home. But as its economy mushrooms and its naval forces swell, it will inevitably require bases to project its growing power. China is reported to be interested in establishing facilities in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Myanmar, Pakistan and Thailand. In December, Rear Adm. Yin Zhou, a senior officer at the Chinese navy's Equipment Research Center, proposed a naval base be established in the Gulf of Aden, which would take Chinese expansion even further west than it is now. Ostensibly, Yin's idea was to support China's naval flotilla attached to the international anti-piracy task force deployed off Somalia. There is no question that piracy is a growing problem, not only in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea, but in the Strait of Malacca and elsewhere. The International Maritime Bureau, which monitors global piracy, said there were 42 attacks on oil tankers around the world in 2009, a 40 percent increase over 2008. And most took place off Somalia and the Arabian Peninsula. But given China's naval expansion, it would make sense for Beijing to seek a military foothold in the Gulf of Aden, adding another strategic dimension and threat of conflict to a region already riddled with risk.

Britain to set up fund to develop Sri Lanka's former battlefield

Britain has agreed to set up a fund to speed up the development of Sri Lanka's north and east which had been battered for over 30 years due to conflict between the government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama told reporters on Friday that Britain's legislator Liam Fox agreed to set up a special fund with the financial help of Britain during his visit to Sri Lanka early this week. Bogollagama said the memorandum of understanding would be signed soon to create the fund. The foreign minister said developing the north and east is the highest priority of the government. According to the minister, Fox had emphasized the need of equal treatment for all the communities to develop the country to full swing using its own potential for economic growth. The Sri Lankan government had introduced massive development programs to develop the north and east after the rebels were defeated in May 2009.

S.Lanka stocks gain 1 pct on retail buying; foreigners exit

Fri Feb 19, 2010

COLOMBO, Feb 19 (Reuters) - Sri Lankan shares rose 1 percent on Friday, fuelled by local retail buying on strong earning hopes, coupled with post-war economic optimism, but foreigners sold stocks, data from the exchange showed. The All-Share Price Index .CSE of the Colombo Stock Exchange rose 36.04 points to 3,768.81, its highest close since Feb. 8. "It's a totally retail-driven market," said Prashan Fernando, chief operating officer at Acuity Stockbrokers. Top mobile operator Dialog Telekom DIAL.CM jumped 7.4 percent to 7.25 rupees a share. The market had been dragged down in recent weeks by political worries and EU concerns. Street protests over the arrest of defeated presidential candidate General Sarath Fonseka since Feb. 8 and an announcement by the European Union to withdraw a trade concession have hurt investor sentiment. The foreign outflow on Friday was 534.7 million rupees. Foreigners, who sold net 785.3 million rupees worth of shares in 2009, have sold a net 4.75 billion worth shares so far this year. The net foreign selling amounts to 2.2 billion rupees since the Jan. 26 presidential election results are announced. The bourse is up 11.3 percent so far this year, following a 125 percent rally in 2009, one of the best in Asia.

<http://in.reuters.com/article/companyNews/idINSGE61I0EV20100219>

NUA leader Ashraff joins Sri Lanka Freedom Party, Feb 18, 2010, 0

Feb 18, Colombo: Ms. Ferial Ashraff, the leader of the National Unit Alliance (NUA), a constituent party of the ruling United People's Freedom Front and Minister of Housing and Construction and 250 supporters of the Minister received Sri Lanka Freedom Party membership from the President Mahinda Rajapaksa today at the Temple Trees.

Ferial Ashraff is the widow of late Mohammed Ashraff, founder of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC).

Former United National Party parliamentarian from Sammanthurai A.M.M Naushad also received the membership in SLFP today from the President.

Former General Secretary of the National Freedom Front (NFF) Nandana Gunathilaka also took the SLFP party membership. He was appointed as Kalutara District organizer from SLFP after he obtained the membership.

General Secretary of SLFP, Minister Maithripala Sirisena, Ministers D.M. Jayaratna and, A.H.M. Fowzie were also present at the occasion.

Feb 19, Colombo: Senior Advisor to Sri Lanka President and the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance leader for the Gampaha district, Basil Rajapaksa will be contesting the forthcoming general election from the Gampaha district.

Basil Rajapaksa, who is also the younger brother of Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapaksa signed his nomination papers today and sought religious blessings at a ceremony held at the Presidential Secretariat.

Speaking afterwards, Basil Rajapaksa promised to carry out the election campaign in the district in an exemplary manner.

Asserting that UPFA will record a unique victory from the Gampaha district, he requested the public in the district to join with the victorious team.

The ruling alliance has fielded 21 candidates for the district. Deputy leader of the district minister Felix Perera, Venerable Buddhureliye Rathana Thera, Pandu Bandaranayake, Lasantha Alagiyawanna, Sarath Kumara Gunaratne, Dr. Mervyn Silva, Piyasiri Jayawickrama, Sarana Gunawardena, Dulip Wijesekara, Ms. Anjan Umma, Neil Rupasinghe and Upali Gunaratne. Western Province Councilor Sisira Jayakody, Chandana Jayakody, Ms. Kokila Harshani Gunawardena, Ruwan Ranatunga, Wasantha Senanayake, Anuruddha Kumari Wijesinghe, Dushantha V. Mahabaduge and widow of Late Minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, Dr. Sudarshani Fernandopulle are also in the list.

Lanka can overcome GSP+
Industry can find methods to adjust

Feb 17, Colombo: The British Shadow Defence Secretary and the Conservative Party parliamentarian, Dr. Liam Fox said that no foreign country or foreign body should interfere in the legal processes of another country and influence the enforcement of the law in a sovereign state. The British MP addressing a joint press conference with Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama in Colombo this evening said that all are equal in the face of the law and no country has the right to pass judgment on the actions of Sri Lanka. Referring to the arrest of defeated presidential candidate General Sarath Fonseka, the British MP said any charges brought against General Fonseka must be clear and he should be tried in a civil court where the transparency will be paramount. "Transparency will enable both the domestic population and the international community to have confidence in the judicial process," he said. Foreign Minister Bogollagama said the legal proceedings regarding the former military chief are taking place in an independent atmosphere. Dr. Fox who is on a private visit to Sri Lanka said the great victory President Rajapaksa received at the presidential elections is overshadowed by the present situation in the country. "It is a great pity to me that the President having won a great victory is having it overshadowed by the situation regarding General Fonseka," he told the BBC in Colombo. The visiting Shadow Defence Secretary met President Mahinda Rajapaksa yesterday and expressed the well wishes of the Britain's Conservative Party leadership to the President on his re-election. The British MP said preparations are in place to open a new fund to help Sri Lanka to rebuild the communal life affected by terrorism. Australia Handed Over A Major Consignment Of Demining Equipment To Sri Lanka

Valued at LKR272 million, the equipment is being provided by the Australian Government for use by the civilian demining unit in the Ministry of Nation Building and

Estate Infrastructure Development. The equipment will substantially increase the Government's capacity to clear mine contaminated areas in the north, with the goal of enabling displaced people to return safely to begin re-establishing communities and livelihoods. The equipment includes five mini-flail machines, which can help deminers to assess and release land for resettlement up to 10 times faster than manual demining. Australia's contribution will help speed the demining and resettlement process. Australia has also procured 320 hand held metal detectors, body armour and other equipment essential for manual demining of urban infrastructure and other areas which cannot be cleared with flails. Procurement of the equipment was undertaken by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). In handing the equipment to the Secretary Kumarasiri, High Commissioner Klugman said: "Demining is essential to enabling the resettlement, reconstruction and recovery effort in the North. Australia has listened carefully to the Government's needs in this area and I am pleased that today we have been able make this important contribution. This equipment will make a real difference to the lives of thousands of displaced people waiting to return to their home towns and villages in the former conflict area." Australia has contributed more than LKR800 million to support demining in Sri Lanka since June 2009. In addition to supporting the Government's humanitarian demining unit, Australia has provided over LKR300 million to two of the Government's demining partners, the Mine Advisory Group and the Swiss demining agency FSD, doing important work in cooperation with the Government's mine clearance effort in the North.

Japanese funds to improve Jaffna Teaching Hospital in Northern Sri Lanka

18, Colombo: The Sri Lankan government is in the process of receiving a grant of nearly three billion rupees from the Government of Japan to develop the Jaffna Teaching Hospital.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa in his capacity as the Minister of Finance and Planning received the Cabinet's approval today to sign an Exchange of notes with the Government of Japan for the project to improve the central functions of Jaffna Teaching Hospital.

The Government of Japan has agreed to provide a grant of Japanese Yen 2.298 billion (approximately Rs.2.9 billion) through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for the development of the hospital. The project, identified as important under the "Uthuru Wasanthaya" accelerated development program for the North, will be implemented by the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition.

The project plans to construct a new four-storied building with an area of 6,870 square meters, that houses a new operation theatre complex including intensive care units (ICUs) and central supply and Sterilizing Department (CSSD), a new laboratory complex, Radiological Diagnosis Department, Neurology and Cardiology Unit with the necessary equipment.

Sri Lanka, Iran mutual friends - Minister

Sri Lanka and Iran have maintained mutually beneficial and fruitful bonds of friendship and cooperation since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1962 and in recent times the ties have expanded considerably in political, economic and cultural fields. Parliamentary Affairs Minister M.H. Mohamed declared so representing the government at the function held at Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel in Colombo on Thursday marking the 31st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The Minister in the course of his speech recalled that the President of Sri Lanka and the President of Iran had exchanged visits in 2007 and 2008 and that both of them had

stressed their firm commitment to further enhance the mutual cooperation in the political, economic, trade, cultural, educational, scientific and technological fields. The visits resulted in the signing of agreements and Memorandum of Understandings between the two countries in the fields of power supply and irrigation as well and the expansion of the oil refinery facilities in Sri Lanka. The agreements for operationalising the Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project and the Sapugaskanda Oil Refinery Project are now in progress with the assistance of the Islamic Republic of Iran, he said. Minister Mohamed also pointed out that the reflection of the increase in contacts between the two countries was due to the specific focus placed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa on expanding ties between Sri Lanka and Iran since his assumption of office in 2005 and Iran continues to extend invaluable support for the socio-economic development of Sri Lanka. Speaking on the occasion Islamic Republic of Iran Ambassador Mahmoud Rahimi Gorji, said that the people of Iran were proud of the fact that they were able to preserve their centuries old traditions and values and uphold their sense of independence and national identity. The country has made noteworthy advances over the years, especially with regard to eradicating illiteracy, economic growth, widening the scope of higher education and achieving vast advances in the areas of scientific technology, industry, mine and energy, he said. The Ambassador added that Iran had also pursued its own independent foreign policy. Peaceful co existence, promotion of bilateral relations and extensive regional and international cooperation had been the corner stone of Iran's foreign policy. While establishing constructive and interactive relations with most countries, Iran also played an active role in various international and regional institutions, he said. Touching upon Iran-Sri Lanka relations the Iranian envoy said that he felt happy to note that the relations between the two countries had been close and productive and that the ties had further expanded in recent times with new avenues of cooperation generated. Referring to the launching of the Uma Oya Project with Iranian funding amounting to USD 500 million the Ambassador said that the project would stand as a lasting testimony to Iran-Sri Lanka friendship. There is also the Rural Electrification project in Sri Lanka costing USD 106 million providing electricity to about 1,000 villages and a housing project in the Batticaloa district for which a grant of USD 1.5 million was to be provided by Iran, the envoy said. Congratulating President Mahinda Rajapaksa over his receiving a strong mandate for a second term in office the Iranian Ambassador wished the President every success in his effort to reconstruct and develop the country.

<http://www.dailynews.lk/2010/02/20/news31.asp>

Sri Lanka Central Bank warns public of gold scams

Feb 18, Colombo: Sri Lanka Central Bank today warned the public that a scam selling gold is being carried out by some elements.

In a statement the Central Bank said that it has come to know of scams that are being perpetrated once again by some people who claim to have been authorized to sell gold belonging to the Central Bank "On that basis, various offers have allegedly been made to various persons to members of the public," the Bank said.

The Central Bank warned that steps will be taken by relevant authorities to trace, identify, and take the necessary legal steps to deal with such offenders.

Meanwhile the Central Bank of Sri Lanka cautioned the general public that they must not be duped by these unscrupulous claimants.

ce the Central Bank is not selling any gold to the public nor has the Central Bank appointed any agents to sell gold on its behalf

Sri Lankan Navy attacked Tamil Nadu Fishermen

Sathyalaya Ramakrishnan reporting from Chennai

Chennai, 19 February, (Asiantribune.com):

Sri Lankan Navy allegedly fired at Tamil Nadu fishermen, who ventured in the sea between Dhansushkodi and Katchativu in Palk Straits yesterday (Thursday). Two boats carrying fishermen were damaged, according to early reports from Rameswaram. Rameswaram Fishermen Association President Bilareans said the Lankan Navy fired 10 rounds, some in the air. Two mechanized boats suffered extensive damage in the firing, but the fishermen escaped unhurt, he added. State Fisheries department officials said they were not sure whether the fishermen had crossed into the Lankan waters. The frightened fishermen raised their hands and pleaded with the Sri Lankan Naval personnel not to fire. Despite this, the Navy fired at the fishing boats. Luckily, no fishermen were injured. Later, the Navymen boarded some of the fishing vessels and damaged costly fishing nets, seized the catch, attacked fishermen and damaged the boats. Some boats suffered extensive damage in the attack. The naval personnel also allegedly warned the Indian fishermen of dire consequences if they ventured into Lankan territorial waters, affected fishermen said. The fresh attack on the fishermen had evoked a tense situation in the coastal hamlets in this Island Town where fishing was the major occupation. Many fishermen associations have appealed the Central and State Governments to intervene and ensure such attacks did not recur.

Sri Lanka vehicle imports fall in October

Feb 20, 2010 (LBO) – Sri Lanka's vehicle imports fell 4.1 percent October 2009 from a year earlier to 21,239 vehicles registered, with most categories showing a decline, according to official data.

Motor car imports were down 54.9 percent to 370 in October, continuing a trend of the past several months, while dual purpose vehicles were down 51.7 percent and land vehicle imports, which include tractors, down 40.5 percent. Import of vehicles such as lorries which transport goods was down 5.6 percent to 1,473, for the same period as measured by registration of new vehicles, according to central bank statistics. Bus imports grew by 14 percent in October to 106, motor cycle imports grew 4.6 percent to 14,231 in the same month and imports of three-wheeled auto-rickshaws were up 2 percent to 3,986. Month on month growth showed an improvement, with a slower decline in October when compared to the 17.6 percent drop in September 2009, indicating an economic recovery towards the latter part of the year. In September 2009, all vehicle classes except for buses - which grew 51.1 percent, showed a decline over the same month the previous year, with some recovery seen in October in the three-wheeler and motorcycle segments. Imports for the ten months to October were down 27.2 percent to 163,931 when compared to the same period last year, with all categories showing a decline. Bus imports were down 41.7 percent to 567, car imports were down a steep 73 percent to 5,017 and three wheeler imports fell 21.3 percent to 29,167 year on year for the ten month period.

Sri Lanka coconut exporter mulls acquisitions
Sri Lankan coconut products exporter Coco Lanka has said it plans to expand and is holding talks with companies it had identified for possible takeover.

The firm, part of the Renuka group, said in a stock exchange filing that group net profit for the December quarter rose 13 percent to 39.8 million rupees from a year ago although sales fell by 25 percent to 291 million. Earnings per share for the quarter were 3.16 rupees compared with 2.81 rupees the year before. "The company, being an investment vehicle for agriculture, food and beverage ventures, is currently evaluating certain acquisitions and green field projects," Coco Lanka managing director S R Rajiyah said in a statement accompanying the interim accounts. "With regard to acquisitions, we have identified potential companies and negotiations are underway." These investments are to be funded by proceeds from the rights issue which closed on February 16, 2010, he said. For the nine months ending December 31, 2009, Coco Lanka's net profit rose 55 percent to 124.7 million rupees while sales fell 14 percent to 917.9 million rupees. Earnings per share for the nine months were 9.89 rupees compared with 6.36 rupees the previous year.

Textile Turnaround

Sri Lanka Kuruwita Textiles profits up on cost cutting

Feb 19, 2010 (LBO) – Sri Lanka's Kuruwita Textile Mills said tight cost control helped generate a net profit of 81.7 million rupees in the December quarter although sales were stagnant, signaling a turnaround from losses caused by recession. The firm, which supplies treated fabric to garment manufacturers, said it will reduce reliance on buyers in the European Union after the EU said it would withdraw duty free access for Sri Lankan clothing exports on human rights concerns. Kuruwita Textile Mills, which is owned by apparel exporter Brandix Textile Holdings, said in a stock exchange filing it will cut costs further and might buy raw material from cheaper sources. Sales for the December quarter were stagnant at 2,017 million but gross profit almost doubled to 201 million rupees from a year ago. Earnings per share for the quarter were 3.27 rupees compared with 0.05 rupees the previous year. The company's net profit in the December quarter of the previous year was only 1.3 million rupees as sales fell owing to the economic downturn, and it was forced to cut prices and bear higher costs at the time. Chairman Aslam Omar said there were signs of recovery in its main markets in the United States and the UK. "The stringent cost saving measures adopted by your company has enabled us to considerably reduce the selling, general and administrative overheads," he told shareholders in a note accompanying the accounts. Although December 2009 quarter sales were stagnant compared with the previous year, they were 57 percent higher than the preceding quarter. In the nine months to December 31, 2009 Kuruwita Textile Mills made a net profit of 54.5 million rupees compared with a loss of 185 million the year before although sales were stagnant at 4.6 billion rupees. Much of the savings in costs came from hedging agreements for greige, unbleached or undyed cloth or yarn, it had entered into with fabric mills in Pakistan. Omar said they could buy cheaper yarn from elsewhere if Sri Lanka loses the GSP Plus trade deal with the EU. Under the deal, exporters have to source some of their supplies from countries in the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) area. The EU said it will withdraw the trade concessions because of alleged human rights abuses in Sri Lanka, a charge the government has rejected. The withdrawal is scheduled to come into effect in August. "In order to mitigate the impact, management is establishing enhanced customer relationships with non-EU customers," Omar said. "Furthermore, if we are not dependent on the GSP+ benefit, the company can source yarn from countries outside the SAARC region, thus providing potential cost reductions

from raw material sourcing.”Omar said the Kuruwita Textile Mills also reduced energy and finance costs.The latest procurement of coal for its in-house burner was 20 percent below the cost of the last procurement which was in 2008“This alone would bring in significant cost savings which will be translated in to better bottom line figures in the months ahead,” Omar said.